STREET & SMITH'S
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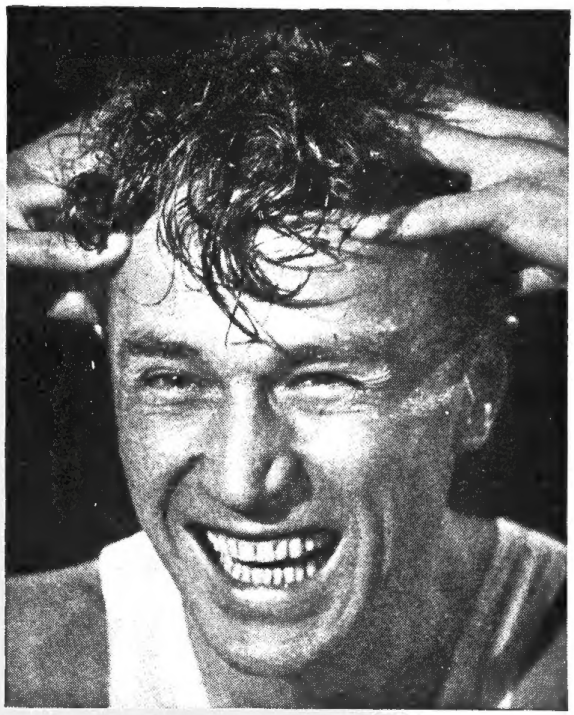
FANTASY FICTION
20c
MAR. 1940
"THE REIGN OF WIZARDRY" by JACK WILLIAMSON

Good News! for DANDRUFF SUFFERERS



Listerine Antiseptic Treatment Fights Infectious Dandruff
Clinical Tests Showed Marked Improvement in 76% of Cases

If you are troubled with infectious dandruff, give Listerine Antiseptic a chance to prove how helpful it can be...how quickly it attacks the infection and those humiliating scales...how fresh, clean, and invigorated it makes your scalp feel. Users everywhere acclaim its benefits.

The treatment is as easy as it is delightful. Just douse the scalp, morning and night, with full strength Listerine Antiseptic – the same Listerine Antiseptic that has been famous for 25 years as a mouth wash and gargle. Massage hair and scalp vigorously and persistently. In clinical tests, dandruff sufferers were delighted to find that this treatment brought rapid improvement in most cases.

Kills Bottle Bacillus

Dandruff is the most frequent scaly disease of the scalp. When this condition is due to germs, as is often the case, Listerine is especially fitted to aid you. It gives the scalp and hair a cooling and invigorating antiseptic bath...kills millions of germs associated with infectious dandruff, including Pityrosporum Ovale. This strange "bottle bacillus" is recognized by outstanding dandruff specialists as a causative agent of infectious dandruff.

Improvement in 76% of Test Cases

Rabbits inoculated with Pityrosporum Ovale developed definite dandruff symptoms which disappeared shortly after being treated with Listerine Antiseptic daily.

And in a dandruff clinic, 76% of the men and women who used Listerine Antiseptic and massage twice a day showed complete disappearance of or marked improvement in the symptoms of dandruff within 30 days.

Don't Delay. Use Listerine Now

If you are troubled with dandruff, don't neglect what may be a real infection. Start with Listerine Antiseptic and massage right now – delay may aggravate the trouble. It's the method that has demonstrated its usefulness in a substantial majority of test cases.

LAMBERT PHARMACAL CO., *St. Louis, Mo.*

THE TREATMENT

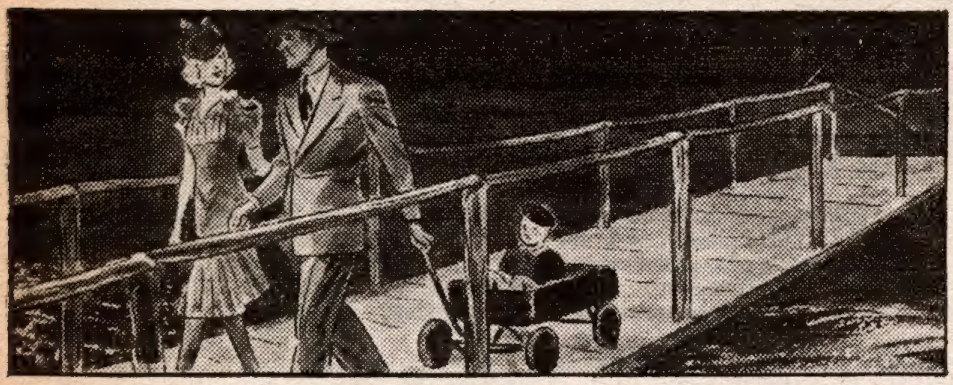
MEN: Douse full strength Listerine Antiseptic on the scalp morning and night. **WOMEN:** Part the hair at various places, and apply Listerine Antiseptic right along the part with a medicine dropper, to avoid wetting the hair excessively.

Always follow with vigorous and persistent massage with fingers or a good hair brush. Continue the treatment so long as dandruff is in evidence. And even though you're free from dandruff, enjoy a Listerine massage once a week to guard against infection.

Genuine Listerine Antiseptic is guaranteed not to bleach the hair or affect texture.

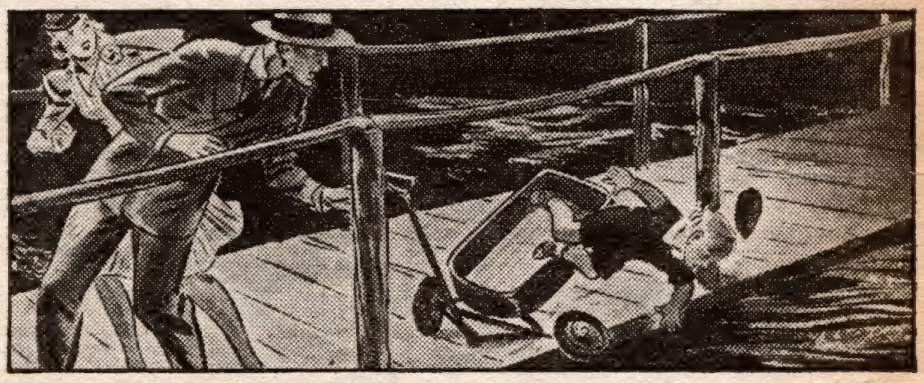
"BLACK, SWIRLING WATERS SWALLOWED OUR BABY!"

A true experience of GEORGE W. HOYT, *Litchfield, Mich.*



1. "NO FOREBODING of impending danger warned my wife and me as we walked home from town one night, pulling our two-year-old boy in his wagon," writes Mr. Hoyt. "We were in the middle of a narrow footbridge, spanning a stream, when fate struck.

2. "SUDDENLY A WHEEL came off the wagon, hurling our baby into the black, swirling waters of the river. Luckily I had my flashlight with me. I switched it on as I jumped over the railing. Despite a thorough soaking, that light did not fail me.



3. "ITS BRIGHT, faithful beam disclosed my boy clinging to the branches of a floating tree! Those dependable 'Eveready' *fresh* DATED batteries helped save our little boy's life. I will never be without them in my flashlight!

NOTE: *An "Eveready" flashlight with "Eveready" batteries, will normally continue to burn under water.*

(*Signed*) George W. Hoyt"

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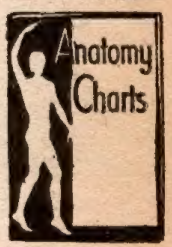

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Illustrations by: Cartier, M. Isip, Koll, Kramer, Orban

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OF THINGS BEYOND

THIS month's crystal gazing is slightly blurred by much water. René Lafayette, new to the ranks of the Unknown, recounts the adventures of one who, perhaps wisely, but certainly too well, followed the example of Kipling's "Sleary," as recounted in his poem, "The Post That Fitted." To complicate an already unhappy situation—the owner of the sanatorium had bills to meet, and Bill looked like a steady source of income—an unfortunate fishing expedition taught Bill what trouble really was. He caught a Triton. In fact, he fished up Trigon, nephew of old Neptune himself. Hence the title—"The Indigestible Triton."

Trigon was annoyed. He'd been mad before—which was why he was so careless as to be caught—but now he really was sore. Incidentally, you will find Trigon's command of invective stimulating. Swear? That Trigon learned all the tricks of all the whalers and sea captains that ever got drowned.

And that, plus some Elementary Military Magic, makes Bill's lot unfortunate. And the story rather lovely, in a blue-tinged atmospheric way.

Also, of course, is the second installment of "The Reign of Wizardry," by Jack Williamson. The picture of Minoan civilization rounds out a bit fuller, more solidly, in this second installment. And the fuller it gets, the deeper Theseus finds himself plunged into it!

Theodore Sturgeon has a novelette in the April issue that is his own curious blend of the oppressive inevitableness of the Greek tragedy and completely modern lightness. "He Shuttles" is both an answer and a title. It's about a very, very clever man who had three wishes—just any three he wanted. (Except, of course, the dodge you're thinking of; that isn't fair. To wish that *all* wishes come true is ruled out by the specification of *three* wishes.) Our very, very clever man makes sure he doesn't waste his wishes; he spends a month thinking just what he wants, and using one wish to stop all the loopholes.

Man, does he stop them!

There isn't a loophole to wiggle out of—

THE EDITOR.

I jumped from $18 a week to $50 -- a Free Book started me toward this GOOD PAY IN RADIO

HERE'S How it Happened

by S. J. E.

(NAME AND ADDRESS SENT UPON REQUEST)

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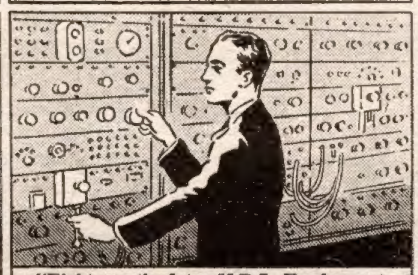

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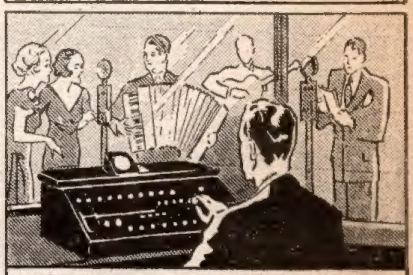

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The Reign of Wizardry

by JACK WILLIAMSON

Foreword:

Once there was an island empire. Its fleets ruled the seas for a thousand years. Its wealth and splendor dazzled all the world. Then it was destroyed—cataclysmically!

Its fall still presents a mystery. For it was cut off abruptly, in the full tide of power. The fleets that had guarded its rich commerce and its unwalled cities were suddenly no more. Its capital city, where men had dwelt for ten thousand years, was

looted and burned and leveled by earthquake shock. Its people were scattered, and presently lost even the memory of their departed greatness.

The history of that empire's splendor and its passing became a legend. Generations of retelling confused the details. Men came to call that lost world Atlantis, and at last began to doubt that it had ever been.

But the account of Atlantis that Plato heard from the Egyptian priests—in almost every detail save the vague location beyond the Pillars of Hercules, and the complete submersion of the land itself—fits what is now known of Minoan Crete.

The conquerors, also, told their own story of what happened. Minos the god-king, the monstrous Minotaur of the Labyrinth, the artificer Daedalus, fair-tressed Ariadne and the victorious Greek hero, all became the figures of a splendid myth.

But merely a myth—until, a hundred years ago, a poor child named Heinrich Schlieman was given a storybook of Homeric Greece. He saw a picture of the walls of Troy, and said that such walls could not have been obliterated, even in three thousand years.

Schlieman ignored the derision of scholars. Beginning life as an ill-paid grocer's clerk, he educated himself, made a fortune, and at last realized his splendid, stubborn dream—he excavated the mound at Hissarlik, and found not one Troy, but nine!

The forgotten gates of a magnificent pre-Homeric world were thus thrown open to knowledge. Sir Arthur Evans was one of the brilliant men who followed Schlieman. He uncovered the great building that was the very heart of that lost world—the Palace of Minos at Knossos in Crete.

Even the carved stone throne of Minos has been preserved, with the griffin frescoes that graced the throne room; a cast of it may be seen in New York's Metropolitan Museum. Excavations at other sites in Crete, at Mycenae and Tiryns, have filled out the picture of a reality more amazing than the legend of Atlantis and the myths of the Greeks.

It was a strangely modern world, whose remains the spades have brought to light. Uncannily modern, in matters as various as plumbing and art and architecture and woman's gowns. Every find at Knossos helps bring to life a gay and sophisticated court.

But the Minoan world had its darker side. Archæology supports the grim legend of the Minotaur. Wall paintings show men and girls engaged in the deadly game of "bull vaulting"; and Dr. Evans found even the dungeon pits, in which the victims of a cruel religion must have awaited sacrifice.

After all the scraps of knowledge have been pieced together, however, Minoan Crete remains a strange and fascinating riddle. The Minoans, it is true, had writing. In fact they were the first printers—on clay—from movable types; and the Phonecians probably got the alphabet from the Philistines, who, after the disaster, were Minoan *émigrés*. But, although thousands of specimens have been discovered, the script has proved mockingly undecipherable.

The fall of the ruthless and decadent Minoan despotism, it seems, must have been one of the decisive events of history. For the democracy and the civilization of Greece, the basis of our own, could have been built only upon the ruins of the Minoan age. The Greek conqueror, then, is one of the supreme men of history. Legend has brought us his name—Theseus.

Knossos fell. The coincidence of earthquake and sword and torch is still a riddle. But the world's oldest and greatest palace was turned into a mound of ruin. For three thousand years it lay abandoned, "uncanny, haunted ground."

Magic and ritual—as the findings of Evans and McKenzie and Pendlebury and the Haweses and others confirm—played a grimly dominant part in the life of Crete. Immemorial Knossos may well have been the cradle of the magical arts. The jigsaw puzzle of myth and archæology and the fragmentary Egyptian records seem inevitably to fall into a dreadful pattern. The most plausible answer to all the riddles of Minoan Crete is—wizardry!

I.

"WHAT are the omens, Captain Firebrand?" Cyron, the bearded Dorian pirate, looked nervous. A hairy hand clutched one of the stays that supported the long galley's single mast, and his scarred face was apprehensive as he peered across the glancing blue water between the green headlands. "Shall we run for the islands?"

Theseus, the tall Achean, stood near the high wolf's-head standard

that rose above the prow. His legs were set wide against the roll and toss of the narrow ship, and his long red hair whipped back in the wind. He shaded his blue eyes, and looked with Cyron into the strait ahead.

Dancing on the white-glinting blue, between the points of land, he found two black dots and a yellow one. He studied them carefully, and the cloud-streaked westward sky, and the ruffled track of the wind upon the sea.

At last his hard tanned body straightened, in the simple loin cloth of captured Egyptian linen. He tossed his red mane back again, and his quick voice rang above the weary monotonous chant of the oar slaves and the creak of the wind-strained rigging.

"The wind is with us, Gamecock," he said. "They are only two against our one—we can forget the trader until the war galleys are sunk. And our bronze beak makes us the equal of three—you said so yourself, when we rammed the last Egyptian."

"Yes, Captain Firebrand," agreed the anxious Dorian. "But *that* was an Egyptian—"

The hairy pirate shuddered a little, in the long stiff cloak of bead-embroidered purple silk that had belonged to a Cretan naval officer. But Theseus drew the long straight sword from his belt, and looked into the polish of its blue steel.

"The men are hungry for plunder," he told Cyron. "And the Falling Star is thirsty for blood." A tense little smile touched his lean face. "I read my omens in the mirror of the Falling Star," he said, "and they are always good!"

He turned on the planking that decked the narrow bow, and shouted past the mast to the slave driver perched on the lip of the oarsmen's pit beyond:

"A faster stroke! We must cut them off before they pass the headland!"

"Aye, Captain Firebrand!"

The Mycenean's long whip hissed and cracked. Forty-four slaves bent to twenty-two oars, eleven to the side. Their endless chant grew swifter, and the galley leapt to its rhythm.

"Hail, Captain Firebrand!" came a shout from the twoscore of sailors and fighting men crowded on the deck above the after cabin, beyond the pit. "Do we fight again?"

Theseus cupped tanned hands to his face. "We fight," he shouted. "And when the lots are cast, we shall have treasure from the north coasts to divide. Gold and amber and furs—and perhaps even fair northern slaves!"

Cheers answered, and he ordered:

"All hands make ready to attack and board!"

Bronze blades rang to the stone. Archers flexed and strung their bows, a slinger stretched his thongs. The boarding crew fitted on leathern helmets, laid ready their long bull-hide shields. At his fire above the pit, the one-eyed Tirynthian cook began heating pots of sulphur.

But Cyron shook his scarred dark head uneasily. Anxiously fingering the edges of the beaded cape, he stepped close to Theseus and protested in a husky whisper:

"But those leading sails are black, Captain Firebrand."

"I see that they are black, Gamecock."

"The black sails mean that they are war galleys of the royal navy of Minos," rasped the apprehensive pirate. "They are guarded by the uncanny artifices of the warlock Daedalus, and by the wizardry of Minos himself. There will be black priests

of the Dark One aboard them, to blast our bodies and our souls with their deadly magic."

Urgently, he touched the bronze arm of Theseus. "Let us turn and run for the islands, Captain Firebrand," he begged, "before their tricks of wizardry set the wind against us, to shatter us against some hostile coast!

"Let us wait for an Egyptian galley," he pleaded huskily, "guarded only by the distant sleepy gods of the Nile. Or perhaps a trader from the East, that trusts in the dusty deities of dead Babylon. Or maybe we shall meet another merchant that carries only the feeble godlings of Troy."

His hairy hand trembled. "Captain Firebrand, we dare not defy the gods and the warlocks of Crete—your attacks must already have angered them, and their wizardry is the strongest in the world. An Egyptian priest told me once—before I disemboweled him—that all magic came first from that evil island. Shall we turn back, captain?"

Theseus touched the gleaming gold-and-silver inlay that covered the hilt of the Falling Star.

"Not so long as I am your elected captain, Gamecock," he said soberly. "I joined your ship, a year ago, because the pirates are the only men in the world who defy the magic and the fleets of Crete. Even the great Pharaoh flatters Minos, and sends him gifts of silver and black slaves and apes."

Cyron looked up at the taller, clean-shaven Achean, with a look of uneasy admiration.

"I know you have done mighty deeds, Captain Firebrand," he said, "for the stories follow you. I know that you have destroyed savage animals, and slain outlaws and tyrants, and fought the men of far lands. But aren't your deeds great enough to rest upon? Must you make war against the wizards, and earn the anger of the very gods?"

The red head of Theseus nodded slowly, and his face was very grave. "I must," he said. "For always I have fought the enemies of men. And the greatest enemy is not the man-hunting animals, nor outlaws, nor barbarian tribes. It is not lurking in the wilderness, but it rules in the heart of the greatest city!"

His hard fingers drew the steel half out of its scabbard. "The greatest enemy is magic, Gamecock. It is the wizardry of Crete that enslaves the world. Even in the tents of the desert, men cower in fear before a talisman that bears the double ax of Minos." His tense face had turned a little white. "All nations send a tribute of boys and girls to be trained for the cruel games at Knossos. Even my own Attica is subject to Minos—my own father, at Athens, must kneel to the Cretan resident, and send gifts to the Dark One."

His breath made a sharp angry sound. "The wizardry of Knossos is a dark serpent that coils about the spirits of men," he said bitterly. "The cruel sea-power of Minos is enforced with fear of the Dark One."

The sword flashed clear of the scabbard. "Well, Gamecock—Minos and the Dark One must be destroyed!"

Cyron clutched the bronzed sword arm, desperately. "Hush, captain!" he gasped apprehensively. "That is blasphemy—and the ears and the horns of the Dark One are long!" He caught his breath. "You misunderstand us, Captain Firebrand. It is true that we are pirates, true that piracy is against the law of Minos. But, until you joined us, we had

preyed only upon the shipping of Egypt and Tiryns and suchlike rivals of Crete—so that the captains of Minos winked at us."

"But now," Theseus reminded him, "I am your elected captain."

"And a good one—if you would forget this madness of a one-man war against the wizardry of Crete," Cyron yielded. "This bronze beak you built upon the galley has already sunk a dozen ships for us."

Grimly, Theseus shook his head. "I invented the ram to destroy the power of Minos," he said slowly. "But, alone, it isn't enough. Great Ekoros, they say, and even the palace of Knossos itself, have no defensive walls. But that Cretan priest boasted to me—before I cut his lying throat—that the power of Minos is guarded by three walls.

"First there is the fleet, that they call the wooden wall. And then, the priest said, there is a giant of living brass, named Talos—he is the second wall."

Cyron plucked uncomfortably at his beard. "I have heard of Talos," he agreed apprehensively. "He is twice the height of a man, and so fleet of foot that he runs around all Crete in a day. He crushes his enemies in his arms, and roasts them against the hot metal of his body. I shall never touch that isle of evil!"

"Unless the Cretans take you there, to feed their Dark One!" Theseus grinned at him. "Then there is another barrier about the power of Minos, that is called the third wall." He stared at the far black sails. "The ram will break the wooden wall, perhaps. But there are still two more to pass."

Cyron pulled the purple cloak defensively about him. "All the walls of Crete," he declared, "are better left alone!"

"We shall see." Theseus smiled again, and a tanned thumb tried his sword. "You had better find your spurs, Gamecock. The Cretans are turning to meet us!"

THESEUS WALKED aft, giving orders and grinning encouragement to the archers climbing to the foredeck, the boarding party waiting with their grapnels in the waist, the slingers on the cabin, the one-eyed cook, Vorkos, coughing over his pots of boiling sulphur. He felt the sharp unease that chilled them all, like a freezing wind.

"Ready, men!" he shouted. "Are you afraid of an old man's muttering? There is a magic in hot blood and good bronze that is stronger than all the wizardry of Minos. Our beak would sink the galley of Admiral Phaistro himself." He flourished his sword in a glittering circle. "And the Falling Star has an enchantment stronger than the Dark One. It was hammered from metal that fell from heaven. You have seen it sever blades of bronze. If you fear the wizards, you are already conquered. If you don't, their power can't touch you! Now, will you follow me?"

He waited, concealing his anxiety.

"Aye, Captain Firebrand!" The shout rang from half a hundred throats. "We will follow you!"

But he heard the doubt, the dread, that lingered in it. He knew that these pirates, boldest men as they were of a dozen northern coasts, still shared Cyron's awe of the wizardry of Crete. They would follow—but not all the way.

It came to Theseus that he stood all alone against the gods of Crete. And even in his own heart was a small, cold fear. For he had met magicians, and he knew that they possessed undeniable powers.

He was glad when the ships came

into fighting range. Singing a bold song, the sailors quickly lowered the square red sheet, unshipped the mast. The first flight of arrows flashed out from the Cretan archers, and fell short in the water.

The Mycenean cursed, and his black whip cracked, and red sweat ran down the backs of the slaves in their pit. Theseus called brief orders to Gothung, the tall blond steersman. And the pirate galley swept in toward the Cretans.

The Cretan officers followed conventional tactics. They raced down upon the quarters of the pirate. Then, at the last moment, their slaves shipped the exposed banks of oars.

The object of the maneuver was to bring the ships together in a glancing collision, shearing off unshipped oars and crushing the enemy's rowers with their shattering ends, and then grapple for boarding.

But Theseus snapped quick orders to the Mycenean slave driver and the gigantic Northman at the steering oars. The pirate swept aside from the path of the racing Cretans, and came about in a swift, puzzling curve.

The two Cretans, briefly helpless with oars shipped, crashed together. Before their slaves, screaming to the whips, could thrust them apart, the pirate drove with flashing oars against the side of the nearest. The bronze ram ripped through the planking, below the waterline.

THE CRETAN archers loosed a storm of arrows. Slung stones hummed, burning sulphur made a suffocating reek. A gang of Cretan marines flung grapnel hooks, then crouched waiting with their nets and tridents to swarm aboard.

But their roof of shields protected the pirates on the narrow bow. Axes severed the grapnel lines, and straining slaves backed the galley.

The bronze beak retreated, and water poured into the Cretan galley. It listed sluggishly, a wave poured over the heavy prow, and it went down with chained slaves shrieking at the oars. Armor-laden men struggled briefly in the foaming sea.

The other Cretan, meantime, had dipped her oars again. Before the pirate could move forward once more, the two long galleys veered together. Theseus shouted an order for the slaves on the exposed side to draw in their oars.

The hulls crashed. Grapnels caught and ropes whipped tight. Bows twanged and slung stones drummed on shields. Smoke of sulphur and cordage and human flesh made a choking stench.

"Board them!" shouted Theseus. "Sixty shekels of silver to the first man over the rail!"

"Aye, Captain Firebrand!"

Cyron, the dark-bearded Dorian, clutching sword and shield, leaped to the low rail of the pirate. For an instant he stood there, his voice lifted in a battle cry. Then abruptly the cry was cut short. He stood petrified.

Upon the lofty after cabin of the Cretan, there had suddenly appeared a swarthy Minoan priest, wrapped in a long black sacerdotal robe. Above the uproar of the battle, his voice lifted in a wailing chant.

At first he used the secret priestly tongue, while his thin hands lifted a silver vessel that was shaped like a bull's head, and poured its foaming red contents into the sea. Then he changed to the common Cretan language, that Theseus had learned long ago from the traders who came to Athens.

"O great Minos," he wailed, "whose years are twenty generations,

who is god of all the world! O great Cybele, mother of Earth and Minos and Men, whose dwelling is the most beauteous Ariadne! O great Dark One, whose name may not be uttered, who art bull and man and god! O great gods of Knossos, destroy these vermin who molest your faithful slaves!

"Bright sword of Minos, strike!"

The black priest held high the red-dripping vessel. And down from the silver horns leaped a blade of blue fire. Thunder crashed deafeningly. And Cyron, sword and shield slipping from his limp hands, dropped loose-limbed back to the pirate's deck.

II.

THE WHOLE BATTLE had halted, to await the climax of the black priest's invocation. That strange bolt broke a breathless hush, and then Theseus heard the triumphant shout of the Cretans. He heard the groan of anguish and terror that ran among the pirates, saw them falter before the swift massing of the Cretan marines. He caught his breath, and lifted the bright steel sword.

"Follow me!" he shouted. "Follow the Falling Star—and stop the cowardly wizardry of Minos!"

He flung aside his heavy 8-shaped shield, too heavy for swift action. Bronze body stripped to the loins, he raced across the narrow deck. A hissing arrow brushed his hair, and a stone stung his arm. The bright sword deflected another arrow, and he leaped from the deck.

His feet spurned the rail. He leaped again from the roof of shields that covered a squad of crouching lancers, and stood upon the high cabin's roof. His naked sword menaced the black Minoan priest, and his voice pealed out: "Where now is the magic of Minos?"

He watched savage elation turn to terror in the smoky eyes of the priest. He saw the dark flash of cunning in them, and glimpsed thin hands pressing quickly on the eyes of the bull's-head vessel.

His sword flashed. He heard a crackling sound, and saw a flash of blue, and caught a stinging odor. But the red-dripping silver vessel pitched out of dying hands into the sea. Severed clean, the priest's head followed it.

"Come!" shouted Theseus. "Follow the Falling Star!"

He leaped down from the cabin, in the rear of the Cretan boarders. His steel parried an arrow, and cleft the archer's throat. He snatched a bull-hide shield from a dying lancer, and his sword slipped hilt-deep through another.

"Come on!" his deep voice pealed. "For the priest of the Dark One is dead!"

Under the eye of the limping Tirynthian cook, four men hurled a pot of blazing sulphur from a net. It spread blue choking flame. The Cretans stumbled back, some of them shrieking in agony. And the pirates swarmed after them, drove them against the busy sword of Theseus.

The galley was taken—but briefly, for the unquenchable sulphur flames swiftly recaptured it. The pirates retreated from the asphyxiating blaze, with such weapons and other loot as they could snatch. Theseus ordered the galley rammed, to end the screaming agony of the chained slaves, and then turned to pursue the yellow-sailed trader.

Now, after the battle was ended, he had a sudden sick awareness of the small margin by which death had passed him by. His arm was bleeding where the stone had stung him, and he found a long red mark

across his ribs, where some point had thrust.

And the Falling Star trembled in his hands, as he had time to recall the strange bolt that had struck down Cyron. Uneasily he remembered the rumors that Minos ruled the lightning. His own dread of the wizardry of Knossos was not all conquered.

"Poor old Gamecock!" he whispered. "Perhaps you were right. Perhaps a man cannot defy the gods."

He dropped on his knees beside the bearded Dorian. He saw the tiny smoke that lifted from a smoldering spot on the stiff splendor of Cyron's beaded cloak; traced the long red burn, branching like a tree, that scarred the pirate's sword arm.

"The warlocks have a power," he muttered. "But you will be avenged, Gamecock." His lean jaw was hard. "Because I'm going on until I die—or until the gods of Crete have fallen!"

"Stay, Captain Firebrand!" Cyron gulped a long breath and opened his eyes. He sat up weakly on the deck, and his trembling fingers clutched desperately at the arm of Theseus. But Theseus was staring at his eyes. They were filmed and distended with horror.

"Forget your mad ambition, Captain Firebrand!" begged the choked dry voice of Cyron. "For I have felt the magic of Minos, and now I know the power of the Dark One—and it is a terrible power!"

"I know that it is terrible," Theseus told him gravely. "That is the reason that it must be destroyed." He grinned, and lifted Cyron to his feet. "You're a tough one, Gamecock! I thought you were dead."

"Almost," whispered the pirate, "I wish I were!"

THE TRADER was a broad ship, deeply burdened, with but seven oars on the side to aid her huge square sail. The pirate, with red sail set again and oars dipping briskly, swiftly overhauled her.

A flight of arrows winged toward the pirate. But the trader carried no more than a score of freemen, to handle arms and sail. When Theseus promised to set them all alive upon the nearest land, her captain surrendered.

"A strange name you have made, Captain Firebrand!" commented Cyron. "There was never another pirate in these waters whose word would take a ship!"

"It isn't men I hate," Theseus told him. "It is the warlocks and gods of evil. We will set the captain and his men ashore on the headland, and leave them food and arms."

"A strange pirate, indeed!" Cyron grunted.

As the yellow sail had indicated, the trader belonged to the merchant fleet of Amur the Hittite, whose house had become great under the protection of Minos. Her captain was a hawk-nosed, sallow-cheeked nephew of Amur himself. It seemed to Theseus that he had accepted capture with a curious and almost alarming indifference.

The trader proved a rich prize. It was laden with gold and tin from the mines on the far northern rivers, and amber and hides and furs. In a narrow pen on the foredeck were three huge wild bulls from the plains of Thessaly. And lying fettered in the cabins were twelve strong youths and twelve tall, graceful girls, all blond-haired people of the north.

Besides the slave girls, there was another woman found unfettered in the Hittite captain's cabin—such a woman as none of the pirates had ever seen. Her skin was the color

of gold, her dark smoldering eyes almond-shaped and queerly slanted.

She was dragged out upon the deck with the rest, to await her lot in the partition of the loot. As the pirate smiths drew her hands behind her and riveted slave fetters to her slim yellow wrists, she stood tall almost as a man, looking past her captors with a proud contempt.

"She's a queen!" whispered Cyron. "There was never such a woman!"

He joined the eager pirates that ringed her, staring with an unfeigned admiration. Pillared elaborately upon her proud head, her hair was black and lustrous. Her golden throat and her arms gleamed with jewels of green jade. A torn gown of sheer crimson silk hid few curves of her tall yellow body.

When the one-eyed Tirynthian, who was also the cook, had done hammering the last rivet, he pushed her roughly. She fell, and her bare yellow knees were bruised on the deck. But she uttered no cry of pain, and in spite of the fetters she came back to her feet with a sinuous grace. Her long burning eyes came slowly to one-eyed Vorkos.

"You are now the masters!" She spoke the Cretan tongue, with a limpid singsong accent. "But I am Tai Leng, a princess of far Cathay. I have a talisman of vision, and now I see the angry hand of Minos hanging like a black cloud over you."

Her smoldering eyes swept over the pirate crew, and her proud, yellow shoulders made a little careless shrug. "Before the sun is set," warned her silken tones, "the greatest of you will be a prisoner in the power of Crete."

The one-eyed Tirynthian retreated uneasily, muttering that she was a sorceress and ought therefore to be burned alive. But Cyron hastily objected that no woman so beautiful should be wasted, even so, and the division of the spoil went on.

This partition was made by a method the pirates had devised. White shells were counted out to each man, according to his rank and valor. Then the metal ingots, the slaves, and the other lots of plunder, were auctioned off for shells.

The golden woman went high. Gothung, the blond steersman, organized a group of men to make a collective bid. Cyron offered all his share of shells, a heavy golden belt, and a fine silver bracelet. Finally, adding his precious purple cloak, he bought her.

While the auction was still in progress on the trader, Theseus took the Hittite captain and his men aboard the pirate, and set them safely on the headland as he had promised. Still he was puzzled about the captain. His beady eyes had watched the division of his cargo with apparent unconcern. And they flickered now and then, Theseus had noticed, ever so briefly toward the southwest.

Southwest was the direction of Knossos.

WHEN THESEUS went back aboard the prize, he found Cyron standing on the foredeck, staring anxiously in the same direction. The bearded pirate turned with a start.

"Captain Firebrand!" His voice was hoarse. "It is time for us to go. For I have spoken with the yellow girl I bought. And she laughed at me and promised me that tonight will end her captivity. The magic of Minos will rescue her, she says."

His voice dropped apprehensively. "The wizards of Knossos, the yellow girl says, have seen all that has happened. Minos will send a fleet, she says. Through the power of the Dark One, he will make a fair wind

to speed the fleet. And he can even make a storm, she told me, to drive us back into the teeth of danger!" Shuddering, Cyron looked fearfully into the southwest.

"It is true," commented Theseus, "that our friend the Hittite captain was watching that quarter very hopefully."

"Then," Cyron demanded, "we shall raise sail while we can?"

"You may, if you think wise," Theseus told him. "But I am going to Knossos."

"To Knossos—in Crete?"

The eyes of Cyron grew big as moons, and he staggered a little backward.

"Not to Knossos! Captain Firebrand, are you mad?"

"Perhaps," said Theseus. "But I am going to Knossos."

"In the name of all the gods," gasped Cyron, "why? The yellow girl told me that Minos has placed a great price upon your head. You are the most feared pirate of the sea. But why walk into a cave of hungry lions?"

Theseus rubbed his lean chin—smooth-shaven with the edge of the Falling Star.

"I talked with the Hittite captain," he said slowly. "What he told me has decided me to go to Knossos. For the nine-year period of the reign of Minos is within two moons of its end, and these slaves and bulls we had taken were intended for the games that take place then."

"But," gasped Cyron, "Captain Firebrand!"

"You must have heard the rule of the Minoan games," said Theseus. "You know that they are played, every nine years, to choose the ruler of Crete. And if any man wins the contests, the old Minos must give up his life, and go down into the dread Labyrinth of the Dark One."

Theseus fingered the hilt of the Falling Star, and a tiny smile touched his lean, bronzed face.

"The winner," he said, "is declared the new Minos. The beauteous Ariadne, the daughter of the old Minos and the vessel of Cybele, will be his to claim. And his will be the Empire of Crete, all the treasure of Knossos, command of the fleets, and even the wizardry of Minos and the Dark One's power."

Cyron stepped back, and his bearded face showed an awed frown. "But I thought, Captain Firebrand," he muttered, "that you sought to destroy the wizardry of Knossos—not to take it for your own!"

Theseus nodded gravely. "I shall destroy them," he said, "when I own them."

Cyron abruptly seized his shoulder and tried to shake him. "Captain Firebrand," he said hoarsely, "are you an utter fool? Don't you know that Minos won the games and his throne a thousand years ago? And that no man has ever had a chance to win, in all the cycles since?"

His voice was dry with dread. "Don't you know that Minos is the greatest of the warlocks? That even the terrible Daedalus serves him? That he is immortal, and destroys with his wizardry all who might hope with skill and daring to win the games?"

"I have heard all that," Theseus said. "But I have never fought in the games at Knossos." His blue eyes smiled. "And the Hittite tells me that Ariadne is very beautiful."

The Dorian answered the grin, grew solemn again. "Captain Firebrand, you can't leave us now." His voice quivered, broke. "It is but a year since you came to our northern rendezvous and begged to join us.

But already you are my captain—and my brother."

His dark eyes looked hastily away. "If you must go to Knossos, captain," he whispered faintly, "then I . . . I'll go with you!"

Theseus smiled again, and took his hand.

"No, Gamecock," he said, "I shall go alone. But cheer up! When the time comes to loot the palace of Minos, perhaps you will be there."

Cyron blinked and grinned. "I'll be there," he choked. Suddenly, then, he started. His dark eyes widened apprehensively again. He stared at Theseus, and then away into the southwest. "Don't joke with me, Captain Firebrand," he begged. "Give the orders, and let us seek the northern islands with our loot."

His pointing arm was trembling. "See the sky in the direction of far Knossos, captain?" His voice sank hoarsely. "How fair it is? And how angrily the clouds are piling in the north? I have felt the wizardry of Knossos, captain, and I fear it!"

The blue eyes of Theseus narrowed, swept the horizon. "It is a strange sky!" he said. "But I'm not joking, Captain Gamecock—for you are captain, now. Give your orders, and take your men and the plunder aboard. Let the men divide my share—and you may have the treasure in my cabin. Only leave me the hull of the trader, for I am going to sail to Knossos." He studied the northward sky again. "I think the wind will be favorable enough."

"Captain Firebrand," protested the Dorian, "I wish you wouldn't—"

Theseus turned, stopped the pirate with a sudden pointing gesture. Far away southwestward, across the flat blue sea, stretched a long line of infinitesimal black dots.

"There comes the black-sailed fleet of Minos," Theseus said, "sweeping fast on a changing wind. I am sailing to meet it. And, if you hope to outfly the wizardry of Knossos, Captain Gamecock, you had better take your yellow woman and set sail!"

III.

Theseus returned to the pirate for the small leather bag that held his personal effects. Climbing back aboard the prize, he found that the preparations to leave it had halted. A score of the booty-laden pirates were standing in a staring ring about the mast. And Vorkos, the one-eyed Tirynthian cook, was kneeling to fan his fire, heating the point of a long bronze lance.

Theseus pushed through the ring. He found Cyron standing angrily over a small yellow-brown man, who was bound to the mast. The prisoner was squealing in terror, trying to writhe away from another red-hot lance that the enraged pirate was flourishing in front of him.

"Now try your wizardry!" muttered Cyron. "Against hot bronze!"

Theseus stared in astonishment at the captive. He was almost a dwarf. Wide-mouthed, froglike, his wrinkled face was remarkably ugly. Terror had given him a faintly greenish color. His head was completely bald, but he had thick black eyebrows. Huge and yellow and white-rimmed, his eyes were popping out with fear.

"Where did he come from, Captain Gamecock?" asked Theseus.

Cyron sputtered incoherently. Theseus looked wonderingly back at the squealing prisoner. He saw with surprise that the little man was clad in torn fragments of crimson silk, that his scrawny brown arms and neck were laden with green jade and gold.

Theseus caught the angry Dorian's arm.

"The Cretan fleet is coming," he warned. "And the storm is gathering swiftly in the north. If you hope to get away, Gamecock, it is time for you to go!"

Cyron dropped the hot lance on the deck and tried to master his wrath. He glanced apprehensively at the long far line of black sails across the south, and shouted at the cook to hasten his fire.

"We'll be going, Captain Firebrand!" he gasped. "But first I am going to burn the eyes out of this small wizard."

"Where did a wizard come from?" demanded Theseus. "And what happened to your golden woman?"

Cyron gulped for his voice, and kicked viciously at the small brown man's shin.

"There was no golden woman," he muttered. "There was only this evil little wizard. He moaned and picked up his buskined toe, which had struck the mast. "He had taken the woman's guise, to save his cowardly carcass from harm."

He spat at the little brown man.

"I sought to kiss the golden woman, and she changed in my arms. Into—that!" He trembled with rage. "To think that I gave all my share of the prize, and my jewels, and even my purple cloak—to buy a grinning ape!"

He tweaked the small man's nose.

"Anyhow, I shall have the pleasure of burning out his eyes—and I am going to enjoy it!"

THE PRISONER emitted another screech, and twisted desperately against the ropes. His bulging, yellow eyes rolled fearfully, and fastened upon Theseus.

"O, Captain Firebrand!" His voice was a high nasal whine. "O greatest of the pirates, whose honor and audacity are spoken even in my own far Babylon! Oh, save me!"

Theseus hooked thumbs in his belt, and shook his red head. "I don't like wizards."

The yellow eyes blinked at him hopefully. "But I am the most insignificant and powerless of wizards," came the frantic piping plea. "My spells are only the feeblest and most useless. None of them can harm any man. If I possessed the powers of the warlocks of Knossos, would I be here, bound, tortured?"

The yellow eyes rolled fearfully to Cyron, and Theseus stepped a little nearer. "So you were the golden princess?"

"I was," whined the little man. "That spell is the greatest of my powers, and even it is feeble. For every touch weakens it, and a kiss will break it." He was watching Cyron, and his voice became a frantic gasping. "I meant no harm, Captain Firebrand. I used the guise only to save my miserable life. Aid me, captain, and I shall be your slave. You can command my tiny magic. Only save—"

Cyron came back with a red-hot lance, and his voice lifted into a shriek.

Theseus gestured the angry pirate back. "Wait, Captain Gamecock," he begged. "Let me speak to this small wizard. There is a saying that magic is best fought with magic. And I fight the wizardry of Crete."

Cyron flourished the glowing blade impatiently. "But I bought this wizard," he muttered. "Surely his eyes are mine, to burn out when I like. And probably his spells will be just as useful after he is blind."

The little man squalled thinly.

"All the treasure in my cabin is yours, Gamecock," said Theseus.

"You can buy one of the blond slaves."

"They are not like the golden princess," muttered Cyron. "But you may speak to him, before I enjoy the small pleasure that his wizard's trick has left me."

Theseus stepped closer to the squirming prisoner, asking: "Who are you, and how came you aboard?"

"My name is Snish," whined the little yellow-brown man, eagerly. "I was born in far-off Babylon. There are many wizards and sorcerers in Babylon. But none of them is so great as the least warlock of Crete. And I was the smallest and feeblest of them all."

"In that case," inquired Theseus, "why were you sailing to Crete?"

"It is an unfortunate matter of the weather," Snish told him.

"The weather?"

THE LITTLE WIZARD rolled anxious yellow eyes at Cyron. "Only the most advanced and gifted sorcerers can actually rule the elements," he explained uneasily. "Minor magicians, however, have sometimes been able to establish substantial reputations upon the natural uncertainties of the weather, merely through fortunate coincidence.

"Now it was one very dry summer when I embarked upon my career in Babylon. The fields were parched about the city, the canals were dry, and the river was too low for irrigation. Under such circumstances, I was unwise enough to undertake contracts to bring rain.

"Every similar drought, I knew, had been ended at last by rain—and some enterprising magician had been able to claim the credit for it. Therefore, I built a mud tower in the fields, and burned herbs on the top of it, and sacrificed a kid, and kept vigils under the stars, and waited, like the farmers, for rain to come.

"But there was never such a drought in Babylon. The sky by day was like a hot copper bowl, and the stars were jewels at night. The young corn withered and blew away on the wind, and the starved cattle died, and men with donkeys made fortunes selling muddy water in the streets of Babylon.

"My clients began to grow impatient. In vain I discussed with them the phenomenal difficulties that faced my enterprise, and trebled my fees. Finally they demanded the return of all they had paid me. The money, unfortunately, was already spent. But my clients departed, without it, and took their problem to another magician.

"This other magician was a stranger, who had arrived in Babylon only recently—almost on the day, in fact, that the drought began. Very little was known of him. But a sudden rumor had swept the city that he came from Crete, and had studied the arts of Daedalus and Minos.

"The stranger offered, for a fabulous sum, to bring rain on this very night. My former clients were desperate. They went to the Hittite usurers, pledged their lands and slaves and cattle and even their wives, and borrowed the stranger's fee.

"That night it rained.

"I knew then that the stranger possessed the power that I had claimed, and that his superior arts must in fact have been responsible for my failure. I sought for him, intending to ask him to take me for an apprentice. But I found that he had already departed. None knew how or where he had gone, but a huge strange bird had been seen rising through the storm clouds.

Wearied to exhaustion now, the Northman's muscles strained and writhed. Slowly—slowly—the great bull's head twisted—

"Returning through the muddy streets to my own dwelling, I found that some of my angry clients had come there to insist upon return of their fees. I found it therefore expedient to assume the guise of a woman and leave Babylon also, astride a donkey."

The Dorian pirate made an impatient gesture with his smoking lance. The little wizard shuddered in the ropes that bound him to the mast, and Theseus held out a restraining hand.

"Wait till you know my peculiar misfortune," begged Snish. "The stranger from Knossos must have cast some powerful spell upon me, which he neglected to lift before he departed. For all matters concerning the weather remain unfortunate for me.

"My travels since I left Babylon have been extensive and usually unwilling. I was put ashore near Troy some moons ago by an Egyptian captain who had begun to suspect that my presence aboard his ship had something to do with unfavorable winds."

Cyron came with a hot lance from the fire. "Let me at him, Captain Firebrand," he begged. "The Cretan fleet is bearing down upon us—this lying little wizard is trying to talk us all to death. Let me burn his eyes out, and go."

"Wait, Gamecock." Theseus stopped him, and turned back to the shuddering little wizard. "If you have such cause to fear the warlocks of Knossos," he said, "you had better explain why you were sailing for Crete! And talk fast!"

SNISH rolled his bulging yellow eyes. "I was coming to that," he wheezed anxiously. "I found myself friendless in Troy. In Babylon, before I so unwisely sought to change my trade, I had been a cobbler. I sought employment in the shops of Troy, but I could find nothing, and hunger presently forced me to make a living with my small arts. I began to make certain prophecies to the clients who came to me—with results that proved unfortunate."

Snish shook his bald, brown head regretfully, and his eyes rolled at Cyron, who was watching the southward sea and flourishing the hot lance with increasing impatience.

"You see, even Troy has been compelled to yield tribute to Minos, and many were inquisitive about the future of Crete. Now, whatever one may actually read of the future—and it is said that the warlocks of Crete can survey it with considerable certainty—it it is almost invariably the best policy for the seer to ignore his actual findings, and tell his clients merely what they wish to believe.

"I assured the Trojans, therefore, that Minos is doomed, and that all the splendor of Crete will one day be forgotten, and that Troy will one day be the mistress of the world—I ignored certain grave indications in the stars as to the fate of Troy itself, save to warn the Trojans to beware of horses.

"I had no rivals in Troy, for it is but a small city, and for a time I was very successful. Too successful, in fact, for my fame reached the ears of the Cretan resident. He sent for a Cretan priest, and the priest had me arrested."

Snish shuddered against the ropes. "It appears," he said, "that all the practitioners of magic in the dominions of Minos are organized in a compact and jealous guild. No wizard outside the guild is allowed to practice. Unwittingly, I broke the law. I was being taken to Knossos, to face what is called the justice of the Dark One."

The little Babylonian trembled and turned slightly green. "Perhaps you have heard of the justice of the Dark One," he gasped. "It is the most fearful fate that can befall a human being. For the victim is sent beyond human justice. He is trust into the black Labyrinth, beneath the palace of Minos, that is the dwelling of the Dark One. And that evil deity, it is said, devours both body and soul of all who enter there."

Snish repressed another shudder, and blinked hopefully at Theseus. "I had induced the Hittite captain to post a bond for me," his shrill voice hurried on. "And I hoped that he could be persuaded to escape from the convoy tonight, and sail for Egypt. But that would have

brought all the wizardry of Knossos upon my trail."

The yellow eyes of Snish followed Cyron's smoking lances. "It is most fortunate for me, Captain Firebrand, that you took the ship," he wheezed hastily. "That is, if you can dissuade this pirate from his evil intent toward the smallest, the kindest, and the most insignificant of wizards. Save me, Captain Firebrand!" His voice became a squeal. "Let my small magic serve you!"

Cyron tugged at the arm of Theseus, and his fingers trembled. "Let me at the wizard," he begged huskily. "For the fleet is coming fast, and the northward sky has an evil look."

"Wait, Gamecock," urged Theseus. "Perhaps I can use his magic."

Snish stirred hopefully in the ropes. "Indeed you can, Captain Firebrand." His yellow eyes lifted to the rising black clouds. "And I suggest, Captain Gamecock," he shrilled, "that you had better leave me, soon. Because, as I told you, I have difficulty with the weather. That storm is doubtless following me."

Apprehension had mounted above Cyron's cooling wrath. He flung his smoking pike down upon the deck, and shouted at his men to make ready with the sail. "Take him, Captain Firebrand," he muttered. "But watch him. For no wizard can be trusted—not even such a cowardly dog of a wizard as this!"

He leaped to the pirate's deck, and axes flashed to cut the lashings. "Farewell, Captain Firebrand!" His shout came hoarse and strained. "Beware the wizard!"

THE RED SAIL went up—for there was still a breath of wind in the south. The Mycenean's long whip came to hissing life, and flashing oars pulled the galley toward the northward strait, to meet the coming storm.

Alone with Snish on the prize, for even the oar slaves had been herded aboard the pirate, Theseus cut the ropes that had bound the little wizard, and sent him to take the steering oars.

Theseus himself climbed the stays and loosed the huge yellow sail to the fitful wind. He had it spread by the time the south wind died and the first cold blast of the storm struck from the north.

"Which way, Captain Firebrand?" came the anxious piping of Snish. "Shall we steer to the east, and seek to escape the Cretans under the darkness of the storm?"

The head of Theseus lifted high, and his red hair whipped in the wind. He looked across the sea, at a long line of black sails advancing upon that amazing south wind. At last he turned, grave-eyed, back to the little wizard.

"No," he said quietly. "Steer straight to meet them."

The brown frog-face turned faintly green once more, and thin gnarled hands trembled on the steering oar. "Aye, Captain Firebrand," wheezed Snish, "we steer straight to meet them." His bald head shook ominously. "But my feeble arts tell me that I should have done better to remain with the Gamecock, even at the cost of my eyes!"

IV.

LOOKING AFT again, when he had the square yellow sail securely set, Theseus was not greatly surprised to see that Snish, at the steering oars, had resumed his feminine guise.

Tai Leng smiled at him, with a smoldering light in her long, almond eyes. A provocative twist of her tall,

golden body moved Theseus briefly to inquire whether the spell might not be made proof against destruction by contact.

The yellow princess shook her head. "The guise is merely a measure of safety," commented her soft singsong. "Even a woman is exposed to certain dangers. But a sufficient beauty can usually evade them."

Approaching her, Theseus fancied that he saw in her yellow features some faint mocking hint of the frog-face of Snish. And the limpid singsong, when she spoke again, had a slight nasal undertone.

"Shall I not disguise you, also, Captain Firebrand?" she asked. "My insignificant arts are at your command."

Theseus shook his head. "I seek to destroy the arts of wizardry, not to employ them." He shrugged wearily. "Anyhow, the overthrow of the throne of Minos is no task for women."

"The guise need not be a woman's," the yellow girl assured him. "That is merely the one which best insures my own safety. I can give you the likeness of any man you choose."

Theseus stared at the black sails march out of the south, before that mysterious wind. "There is the black priest I killed." He rubbed reflectively at his lean chin. "No," he said abruptly. "In time, such a guise might be useful. But now I am going to meet the Cretans as the pirate, Captain Firebrand, with the Falling Star to speak for me."

The long, almond eyes of Tai Leng smoldered, inscrutable. "But Captain Firebrand is already wanted," her silken voice protested. "Minos has offered ten talents of silver for your head—"

The singsong ceased abruptly; something glittered in her smoky eyes.

"Seek to collect it," warned Theseus, grimly, "and no wizard's guise will save your guts from being spilled by the Falling Star!"

To emphasize the warning, he seized the soft yellow curve of a shoulder exposed by the torn crimson silk and shook vigorously. The result was a strange transformation.

The yielding golden flesh changed under his fingers; became brown, bony. The exotic woman's face melted halfway into the ugly frog-features of Snish, and the protesting voice had a nasal whine: "Captain Firebrand, can't you trust me? For I owe you my eyes, and even my life. I am your smallest, most miserable, most devoted slave."

"I trust no wizard—not even if he is small enough to be a louse on my belly," muttered Theseus. "However, your arts may be useful to me—puny as they are against the wizardry of Knossos. I shall not destroy you—yet."

The golden princess dropped on her knees and kissed his hand. He felt her lips change, as they pressed against his fingers. And for a moment the black lustrous pile of her perfumed hair was gone, and he saw the brown bald head of Snish.

"Go back to your steering oar," Theseus told her. "The word of a wizard is nothing; but, so long as we are both enemies of Knossos, perhaps we can serve one another."

HE THREW HAY to the three great black bulls, bellowing in their narrow pen. Eying the graceful danger of their tapered tossing horns, he thought of the games to be played for the throne of Minos, and could not help a little shudder. For many perils lay before the throne, and

those horns were but the symbol of the Dark One's monstrous power.

Driven before the storm, the trader plowed on southward. The fleet came before that strange south wind to meet her, and narrow black hulls lifted beneath the black square sails.

Black bulls'-head standards came into view, and at last Theseus could see the purple streamer that marked the flagship. He commanded the yellow woman to steer toward it. Tai Leng silently obeyed. Her yellow face was pale, and fear distended her long, oblique eyes.

The cold storm wind faltered and died as the fleet drew near. The galley wallowed, yellow sail slack, in a sudden calm. The south wind that brought the Cretans had ceased also, and glinting oars brought the flagship across the last arrow's flight.

"Ahoy!" shouted a brass-lunged officer. "What ship spreads the yellow sail of Amur the Hittite?"

Theseus cupped bronze hands to his face. "This ship is a prize of war," he returned. "Her captain is the free Achean, Captain Firebrand. He sails to Crete, with a gift of three black bulls for the Minoan games, and a yellow princess of Cathay to grace the megaron of Minos. But what ship spreads the black sail of Knossos?"

There was a startled pause before: "This ship," the officer bellowed, "is the flagship of the north fleet of Minos, who is himself a god and companion of the Dark One, who is also ruler of Crete and the isles of the sea and the coasts beyond. And her commander is Phaistro, first noble of Knossos and admiral of all the fleets of Minos."

The ships touched. A squad of Cretan marines, armed with nets and tridents, leaped to the trader's deck and made a watchful circle about Theseus. When the ships were lashed, Phaistro himself followed.

The admiral was tall for a Cretan, but small-boned and wiry. His swarthy face was thinly aristocratic, almost handsome. Theseus looked at the feeble chin, the full red lips and the dark, sullen eyes. He saw the lines in the face, the nervous tension of the body. For all his passion and his pride, Theseus thought, this man was yet a weakling.

With a walk that had a certain womanish grace, Phaistro crossed the deck. Theseus caught the perfume of his dark hair, which was dressed in the elaborate Cretan fashion, with three coils on the head and three long curls behind.

The admiral's attire was rich and almost femininely dainty. His loose ceremonial robe was the purple of his rank. Parted in the front, it showed his tight-drawn golden belt and white linen loincloth. He wore tall, embroidered buskins, and his bare, brown arms were laden with gold and silver bracelets.

SURROUNDED with a little group of officers, who held ready hands on their swords, the admiral paused before Theseus. His narrow face seemed to reflect a certain unwilling admiration. "So you are the famous Captain Firebrand?"

"Men call me that," said Theseus.

"Then where is your swift galley, that has taken so many prizes?" Suddenly piercing, the dark eyes of the admiral studied Theseus. "And where are your reckless men?"

"Ask your wizards," Theseus said.

Phaistro caught his breath, and anger glittered in his eyes. "Where is this ship's crew?" His voice crackled. "And all the treasure from the north coasts that was aboard?

And where are the two royal convoys?"

Theseus grinned. "The Hittite and his men are safe on the headland behind us," he said. "As for the treasure and the convoys, ask your wizards again. Or go fishing on the bottom of the sea!"

The admiral made a sputtering sound, and trembled in the purple robe. "Captain Firebrand"—his voice came tense and sharp—"we have heard of you at Knossos—"

"—And you'll hear more," Theseus promised quietly. "Because I am sailing for Crete, with gifts for Minos." He nodded at the wild black bulls in their pen on the deck, at the tall yellow girl by the steering oar. "And I am going to enter the cyclic games," he said, "as a candidate for the throne of Minos."

The admiral stiffened. For a moment he was breathless, his dark eyes wide with astonishment. Then he bent convulsively, and his thin face turned red, and he cackled with shrill laughter. He turned to the Cretan officers about him, small dark men with broad leather belts and black loincloths, gasping through his laughter: "The pirate says he is going to enter the games, to seek the throne of Minos. Isn't that a capital joke?"

Evidently it was. The officers doubled themselves with merriment —without neglecting, however, to keep watchful eyes on Theseus and ready hands near their swords. At last the admiral sobered his thin face and turned back to Theseus.

"I'm sure, Captain Firebrand," he said, weak-voiced from laughter, "that your battles with bulls and men and the gods will make a very interesting spectacle. But don't you think you are somewhat rash to volunteer, when no man has won the games in the last hundred cycles?"

"It seems to me," Theseus said, "that Minos is the rash one, to keep repeating the games. But what is your joke?"

Phaistro laughed again, until tears came into his eyes. "The joke . . . the joke is very simple," he panted at last. "You tell us that you are sailing to Crete to enter the Minoan games. And the orders of the fleet, Captain Firebrand, were to bring you to Knossos—to be flung into the games!"

"If that is a joke," said Theseus, "aren't you perhaps laughing ahead of the point?"

Phaistro flushed red again with anger. His thin hands clenched and his dark eyes glittered. After a moment, however, he gulped and tried to smile at the tall Achean.

"I forgive your insolence, Captain Firebrand, because you are a brave man," he said. "And I am going to offer you a piece of advice—again because your audacity moves me."

PHAISTRO STEPPED quickly forward from his officers, and: "Don't surrender your sword," he urged quickly, in a lowered voice. "Don't let us take you alive to Knossos! Better throw yourself upon your own blade, and die cleanly outside the shadow of the Dark One."

Theseus touched his sword, smiling. "Thank you, admiral," he said softly. "And I shall not surrender the Falling Star. But neither shall I kill myself." He drew the long steel blade out of its scabbard. "I am going to carry the Falling Star to Crete."

Phaistro's thin face turned dark again. "Pirate, your impudence has gone too far," he snapped angrily. "Give up your sword—or my men will take it."

Theseus lifted the blade. "Let them try!" His blue eyes smiled

warily. "There are wizards outside Knossos," he said softly. "One of them, admiral, is my slave. And my sword was forged from a burning star. It is an enchanted blade, and it will cut any other. If you want it—take it!"

Phaistro's dark eyes flickered uncertainly aside at the tall golden form of Tai Leng, standing lazily beside the steering oar. They roved the empty decks, and came uneasily back to Theseus and the brandished Falling Star.

Theseus watched the admiral's narrow face. It still had the tensity of anger, but the pallor of fear was now upon it, too. Phaistro was obviously afraid of wizardry. And it must seem strange, Theseus knew, to meet a ship sailed by two alone: such a man as he was, and such a woman as Tai Leng.

The full red lips of the admiral quivered uncertainly. His thin hands clenched and opened, and tugged uncertainly at the edges of his purple robe. And his awe of magic at last prevailed.

"If your weapon is indeed protected by enchantment," he yielded at last, "then you can carry it until we touch Crete. There Minos and his wizards can break the spell soon enough. And no doubt brazen Talos can take it from you, if he must. For no man carries any weapon into the Minoan games."

"We shall see," Theseus said, "when we come to Crete."

Phaistro made a gesture toward the flagship. "Now, Captain Firebrand," he said, "come aboard my vessel. You will be my guest of honor, until we land. I'll leave a crew to sail this ship. The priests will be waiting for you at the docks."

Theseus shook his head. "This ship is my prize," he said quietly. "I am sailing her to Crete, carrying gifts to Minos, and I require no aid. I'll deal with Minos and his priests when I meet them."

Dark red of anger mounted once more into the admiral's thin face. His quivering mouth opened for some command. But his eyes dwelt anxiously upon the bright ready sword of Theseus and the strange yellow beauty of Tai Leng. Abruptly he muttered something to his officers, led them back toward the flagship.

"Sail on, Captain Firebrand!" Phaistro shouted hoarsely from his own deck. "We shall follow you to Knossos."

His marines cast the lashings loose. Theseus and the golden woman were left once more alone upon the prize.

"Beware, Captain Firebrand!" The melodious singsong of Tai Leng carried a faint whining undertone of Snish. "Those who claim enchantments which they don't possess are indeed in danger from the warlocks of Knossos. I know!"

"We shall see," Theseus repeated, "when we arrive in Crete."

THE SOUTH WIND that brought the fleet had dropped into an utter calm. But the black mountain of the storm still loomed in the north, and now a fresh cold wind blew out of it again. The yellow sail filled. And the Cretan ships came about and sailed close to the prize, back toward Knossos.

That change of the wind, Theseus knew, was a perfectly natural thing. A thousand times he had seen the wind blow against a storm, and die, and rise again out of the cloud. And yet he could not help a shudder, at the way the winds seemed to serve the wizardry of Crete.

The sun had not yet set when another long galley came out of the southwest. It bore no sail, and the mast was unshipped, for it came

against the wind. But swift-flashing oars brought it on at racing speed, and presently Theseus could see that its standard was the golden eagle of Amur the Hittite.

The galley hailed the black flagship. The admiral's sail was briefly lowered, and oars brought the two vessels prow to prow. Two men leaped across to the flagship, and the black sail went up again.

Across two arrow-flights of water, Theseus watched the two strangers hurry aft. He could see that one of them wore the long black robe of a Minoan priest, that the other was garbed in the yellow of Amur.

The admiral, in his own purple, met them before his high cabin. The priest handed him something thin and white. He unrolled it, into a papyrus scroll. For a few moments he was motionless, as if reading. Then the three began waving their hands excitedly.

No word of their conversation reached Theseus. But he saw each of them, in turn, point in his direction. He was wondering, with growing apprehension, what they were talking about, when the liquid voice of Tai Leng softly called: "Captain Firebrand!"

Theseus turned to the tall yellow woman leaning on the steering oar. Her smooth exotic face was intent, her long slanted eyes fixed on the distant group. Again Theseus found space to regret that her allure was all illusion.

"Captain, you wish to know what they say of you?"

"Of course I do." Theseus stepped quickly to her side—and saw that mocking hint of Snish come back into her golden beauty. "You can tell?"

"Eavesdropping is among the simplest bits of magic," Tai Leng assured him—and her singsong had a nasal hint of Snish. "Even I have mastered that. Except, of course, that I cannot eavesdrop upon a more powerful magician."

"Well," demanded Theseus, "what are they saying?"

"The priest has brought a letter from Minos to the admiral. He read it aloud. It contains new orders with regard to your fate, Captain Firebrand."

Theseus glanced apprehensively back at the three. "And what are the new orders?"

"Evidently Minos has consulted the screed of the future—and discovered that he was unwise in ordering you to be brought to Knossos for the games. Because the letter contains orders that you are to be slain at once."

The hand of Theseus slipped automatically toward the Falling Star. "Your body," Tai Leng went on, "is to be sealed in a lead-lined casket, and secured by certain powerful talismans that the priest has brought with him, and dropped into the sea where it is deep.

"Only your sword is to be carried back to Knossos, as proof that you are dead." The golden princess shuddered. "That makes matters appear very grave," said her nasal singsong. "For both of us."

V.

"And what," inquired Theseus, "are they saying now?"

The slanted smoldering eyes of the golden girl—which showed, when Theseus looked closely, a curious yellow hint of the popping eyes of Snish—peered back at the three long-robed men on the other galley.

"The yellow-robe," Tai Leng told him, "is Amur the Hittite, himself. He is the richest man in the world, and probably the most crafty. He is

no wizard, but his wealth can bind warlocks to serve him."

"I've heard of Amur," said Theseus. "What does he want?"

"Amur," said the yellow woman, "learned of the same prescience that caused Minos to dispatch the new orders for your death. And the Hittite, being a crafty man, formed a scheme to turn the situation into silver and gold."

"And what is the scheme?"

Tai Leng watched for a while, silently. "Amur is unwilling to reveal his plan, before the Minoan priest," she said at last. "But soon you will know. Because he and the admiral are coming aboard, to speak with you."

Theseus saw that the flagship was veering toward them.

"Whatever his plot is," warned her nasal singsong, "it means no more good for you than the papyrus from Minos. For Amur is sometimes called the scorpion, and his craft is a venom that poisons men."

Once again the Cretan marines grappled the trader, lashed it to the flagship. Small brown officers assisted Admiral Phaistro and Amur the Hittite over the rails. Theseus walked to meet them, staring curiously at the Hittite.

Amur was a swarthy man, with the powerful hooked nose of his race. His dark eyes were beady, cunning, set too close together. Shaven, in the Cretan fashion, his face had a bloodless, waxen look. His limbs were thin, but his body seemed fat, bloated. He was laden with golden jewelry. His hungry eyes flashed about the empty decks, then glittered at Theseus with a concentrated malice.

"This is my ship, that my nephew commanded!" His voice had a husky, whispering quality. "Where is the amber and tin and silver that he brought from the north coasts? And the bales of fur, and the blond slaves?"

"You might go fishing for them." Theseus grinned. "Or ask the wizards."

Amur stepped close to Theseus, and his eyes glittered craftily. "I have asked the wizards," his dry voice rasped. "I climbed to the high tower of the great Daedalus himself, and paid him five talents of silver for the spinning of his shining ball—the warlocks think of nothing but robbing honest men with their fees!

"But he showed me your red-sailed galley, Captain Firebrand, fleeing up into the islands with my treasure. I have spoken to Phaistro, who is my friend." Amur leered at the purple-robed admiral. "And another fleet will be dispatched, upon a favorable wind, to intercept the pirate."

His hands drew into thin, tense claws, and Theseus saw that the yellow fingers were heavy with golden rings.

"All my treasure will be recovered," grated the flat voice of Amur. "To the last grain of silver! The pirates will be captured, for my slave pens." The small eyes gleamed. "And you, Captain Firebrand, shall restore my five talents of silver—twenty times over."

THESEUS waited, thoughtfully fingering the inlaid hilt of the Falling Star. Here was another type of man, it came to him, whose power was almost as evil as wizardry. Amur stepped back from him, anxiously.

"Hold your blade, Captain Firebrand," he rasped anxiously. "For I have come to save your life." He came nearer, dropped his voice. "The warlocks have read the tablets of time," he whispered swiftly. "They

find indications of your victory if you enter the Minoan games."

Theseus touched the Falling Star, and grinned. "I read the same omens in my blade," he said.

The close-set eyes of Amur narrowed. "Minos has dispatched orders for your death," he rasped. "But I have come to save your life for the games. For Minos requires no proof of your death but your sword, and the body of a slave can fill the weighted box we sink into the sea."

Theseus grinned again. "Your own body could!"

Amur flinched, but his hoarse whisper raced on: "I shall take you to Crete aboard my own galley. And there is a wizard in Ekoros who has certain things to hide. For a few talents of silver—and to save his cowardly life—he will turn you into a black Nubian. I shall send the Nubian to Minos from my slave pens, a gift for the games. And the Nubian—unless the warlocks have lied—will win."

"But how," demanded Theseus, "do you make any money out of that?"

The small black eyes of Amur shone hungrily. "The Minoan games are divided into nine contests," his swift whisper rasped. "One for each year of the cycle. You must face three wild bulls, three fighting men, and three gods. And it is a custom of the nobles and the merchants of Crete to place wagers on each contest."

Amur laced gold-ringed fingers across his belly. "How an unarmed man can win those nine contests, I don't know. That is your problem. But Minos must believe you can. And my black Nubian will win all that is wagered that day!"

Theseus turned slowly from Amur to Phaistro. The purple-robed admiral had been looking on, silently. His thin face seemed pale, tortured.

"What do you say of this, admiral?" demanded Theseus. "Minos has ordered you to kill me."

Amur laid a cold hand on the arm of Theseus, and rasped an answer for the admiral: "He will do as I request, Captain Firebrand. I am no warlock, yet even I possess a certain power. The noble Phaistro will do whatever I ask, even if I require him to cut off his hand. Is that not true, admiral?"

The red lips of Phaistro trembled, and he nodded unhappily.

The cold, bright snake-eyes of Amur came back to Theseus. "You see, Captain Firebrand, my scheme has neglected nothing. Now give up your sword to the admiral, and come aboard my galley—and soon you will be mounting the gilded throne of Minos!"

THESEUS reached for the hilt of the Falling Star. He drew the long blade from its sheath, and looked down into the gleaming mirror of its polish, and saw there the sad face of his father.

It was on that solemn night, many years ago, when proud Athens had bowed at last to the ships and the wizardry of Knossos. His father, the Achean king, was wearily pacing his long stone-flagged hall in the simple palace upon the Acropolis. Faintly they could hear the women, in their quarters, wailing for the men who had died that day.

Theseus followed the tired limping steps of Aegeus. "I know you had to yield, father," he said. "I saw the blue shining bolts that struck down your captains. I know your men fled from the sorcery of Crete. The truce saved Athens from being burned, saved your people

from being carried off to feed the evil god of Knossos.

"But I am not going to give up, father!"

The wounded king paused and looked down at him. "But you . . . you are only a slip of a lad, Theseus —you can't well defy an empire whose ruler is a god."

"Yes, I can, father. I am going away tonight, toward the far lands that are still free from Crete. I shall train myself to be brave and strong, and grow up to be a fighting man. And I shall make war on Minos, so long as I live!"

A smile came to the king's haggard face. "I am glad, my son," Aegeus said softly. "You have made me happy again. And I shall give you my sword to carry with you—if you are strong enough to lift the stone where it is hidden from the Cretans."

The king limped to point out the heavy flagstone. Theseus eagerly caught the edges of it, and pried and strained until at last it turned over. His father took up the sword, and gave it to him, and he admired the bright color of its steel.

"It is named the Falling Star," the king told him, "because its strange bright metal fell from the sky. The lame smith who forged it was a very wise man, and he hammered a simple spell into the blade.

"It will guard the freedom of the Greeks, the smith promised me, hew their way to greatness. But it must never be surrendered. For the man who gives it up, yields also his honor and his life."

Trembling with pride, Theseus swung the blade. It was heavy for his young arm, and the hilt too large for his hand. But he rejoiced in the cold weight of it, and the magical fire that ran along its edge.

"I thank you, father," he whispered. "I shall never give up the Falling Star. And I shall carry it against the wizardry of Knossos, and fight for the freedom of the Greeks, so long as I can lift it!"

He wept as he embraced his father, and took the heavy sword, and went out into the night. He slipped past the watch fire of the Cretan sentries, climbed by a way he knew down the steep slope of the Acropolis, and ran away through the darkness that lay upon the conquered plain of Attica.

Now, in the mirror of the blade, Theseus could see the yellow robe of Amur and the admiral's purple. They moved impatiently.

"Give up the sword," rapped the sharp tones of Phaistro, "or I shall signal my archers to draw—and bury you at sea as Minos commanded."

"Choose!" rasped the Hittite. "Life and victory and the throne of Minos—or death!" His eyes flickered uneasily into the north. "And quickly. For the warlocks are sending a storm to hasten us home."

Theseus saw an angry blade of lightning stab from the dark wall of cloud to northward. His eyes came back to Tai Leng, found the yellow woman standing by the steering oar, stiff and pale as if with dread. His lean body drew straight with decision.

"If you want the Falling Star"—he grinned at Amur and the admiral —"you'll have to take it!"

The hawk-nosed face of Amur drew into a yellow mask of evil wrath. Dark with anger, the admiral turned, as if to signal his waiting archers. But Theseus, with a gesture at the storm cloud, stopped him.

"Wait a moment, admiral—if you hope to see dry land again!"

The two watched mistrustfully as Theseus beckoned to Tai Leng. Moving with a lazy queenly grace, the yellow woman left the steering oar, and came to him. A gust of cold wind fluttered the torn crimson silk against her tall body.

"Snish," commanded Theseus, "resume your true form!"

Her golden face went pale with fear.

"But—my master—"

"Obey," ordered Theseus. "Or I shall touch you."

"Master," sobbed Tai Leng, "my life and my arts are yours!"

Abruptly, then, squat little Snish was standing where she had stood, with the tattered silk whipping about his gnarled brown figure.

VI.

THE SEAMED frog-face of Snish was as pale, almost, as the yellow girl's had been, and his huge yellow eyes were bulging with dread. Faintly, his thin voice whined:

"Captain Firebrand, what do you require of your most insignificant slave?"

Standing beside him, Theseus whispered: "I think that your difficulty with the weather is going to save both our lives!"

He turned to Amur and the admiral. Both of them had already betrayed awe of the warlock's art. Now Phaistro's thin face was pale and rigid. Amur, waxen-cheeked, was desperately breathing some incantation.

"I'm afraid that you have misled yourselves," Theseus told them. "For the storm approaching us is not the work of Minos at all—nor of anyone, admiral, who will be very tender with your ships."

He gestured at the angry avalanche of black cloud rolling down from the north, and then at the shuddering Snish.

"This is my own wizard," he announced, and lifted his voice above a rumble of thunder. "He is a most remarkable Babylonian sorcerer, and he is responsible for this storm. Tell them, Snish!"

The little wizard nodded his brown bald head, apprehensively. He made a fearful little obeisance toward Amur and the admiral. "Masters, that is true," he croaked against the roar of a rising wind. "The storm follows me!"

Casting an uneasy eye at the storm, the admiral stiffened angrily.

"Nonsense!" he rapped sharply. "You can see the dwarf is scared to death. I'll yield to no such trick. Your sword, Captain Firebrand, or your life!"

But Amur was tugging fearfully at his arm. "All wizards are cowards," rasped the Hittite. "Beware!"

"Beware!" echoed Theseus, and whitecaps flashed ominously across the northward sea. Great sudden drops of rain spattered the deck, and the wind struck savagely. Strained rigging creaked and the galley heeled far over.

"Cut us free," Theseus shouted, against the bellow of wind and thunder, "while you can!"

Amur and the admiral scrambled up the sloping deck, tumbled back aboard the flagship. Marines with axes hewed desperately at the lashings. The vessels parted, and the sea flung them back together with an ominous crash.

Running to aid Snish with the steering oar, Theseus crouched beneath a flight of arrows. But most of the Cretans were already busy reefing sail.

Theseus leaned on a steering oar, and the racing galley heeled until

the waves washed her gunwales. Her lifted hull caught the second flight of arrows. Then the flagship's black sail split with a boom, and she was left behind.

"Captain Firebrand!" gasped Snish, who had not resumed his feminine guise, "cut loose the sail! Or we'll capsize!"

Theseus flung his strength against the oar, and the vessel rode up out of a yawning trough. Snish turned green and doubled over the rail. The wind whipped torn red silk about his shuddering brown body.

In the dusky, unreal light of the storm, they drew ahead of the fleet. A lightning flash revealed the black hulls, scattered and tossing, sails clewed up and oarsmen fighting the storm. And then they were hidden beyond a curtain of rain.

Night fell above the cloud, and blue twilight thickened to inky blackness. The battered galley groaned, and dipped until water buried her foredeck. But Theseus stood by Snish at the steering oars, and took her through the storm until its first violence began to slacken.

"We shall reach the coast of Crete," Theseus shouted, "before this wind has died."

Snish came stumbling weakly back from the rail. "So we may, Captain Firebrand," he croaked weakly. "We may be flung upon it in the darkness, and broken on the rocks." A last flicker of lightning showed his huge-mouthed face, eloquent with apprehension. "Let us bear to the east," he gasped hoarsely. "This wind will carry us around the end of Crete by dawn. And beyond lies Egypt."

"But Crete is our destination."

Snish was sick again. "Egypt is a better one," he wheezed from the rail. "It is an ancient land, Captain Firebrand, and wealthy. Its gods dwell elsewhere and seldom trouble men, and their priests have no such evil powers as the warlocks of Knossos."

He stumbled back to Theseus. "With your sword, Captain Firebrand, and my small arts," he croaked hopefully, "we can win wealth and renown for ourselves in Egypt. We can earn lands and slaves and honor."

"That may be," agreed Theseus. "But we are going to Crete. You heard the scroll. You know that Minos himself has foreseen that I shall win the games. And send him into the Labyrinth to seek the mercy of his own dark god! And claim for myself his gilded throne and the charms of fair Ariadne—to enjoy until I can overwhelm the Dark One and end the reign of wizardry!"

The quivering hand of Snish caught his arm in the darkness. "But Minos is strong on his throne," protested the little wizard, "and he has held it for a thousand years. While times are unsettled in Egypt, and the Pharaoh himself trembles before the press of invaders from the north. Why not join with those invaders, Captain Firebrand? You might even become the new Pharaoh."

"We are going to Knossos."

"But consider the folly of that," Snish croaked urgently. "It is not quickness nor courage, nor even battle craft, that wins in the Minoan games. It is magic. And Minos is the oldest and greatest magician. He is himself a god! Therefore he always wins—and they who seek his throne always perish before his wizardry."

Theseus peered into the gloom that lay upon the tossing sea. "We shall see," he said. "Already we have passed the fleet."

"But the fleet is merely the

wooden wall of unwalled Knossos," argued Snish. "There is Talos, the giant of brass, that the Cretans call the second wall. And Talos alone could break down the walls of any city, or scatter any army that ever marched.

"Even if you should pass by Talos, there is the secret that is called the wall of wizardry. It is known only to Minos and his daughter Ariadne. But its strange power is stronger than the fleet, and stronger than the giant of brass."

Cold and trembling, the hand of Snish tightened on Theseus' arm. "Now, Captain Firebrand," he croaked hopefully, "shall we sail for Egypt?"

"We shall, small wizard." Thesus laughed. "After we have destroyed Minos, and broken the power of the Dark One."

"Then"—and the teeth of Snish were chattering—"we shall never see Egypt!"

THE NIGHT wore on, and the north wind continued to blow. Theseus sent Snish to the cabin to sleep, and steered the ship alone. At last, far to westward, he saw a light that burned strangely red and green.

The light was a beacon fire, he knew, kindled on a tower on the headland, to guide the ships of Crete to the harbor below Ekoros. It was colored, he had heard, with magical salts thrown into the flames.

He roused Snish to steer again, and trimmed the sail to bear toward it. The wind was still high for such a tack.

The galley heeled dangerously, and Snish grew ill again. "We'll never touch land alive," gasped the little wizard. "The wind is crowding us on the rocks!" His whine became a warning shriek. "Captain—ahead!"

Theseus saw the glint of that far light upon leaping spray. He heard the thunder of wild water, and ran toward the steering oars. But the galley plunged upon the rocks. Fangs of stone bit through the hull, water foamed into the empty oarsmen's pit. Rigging snapped. The mast splintered, smashed down.

An instant of silence followed the crash, and: "Captain, it is the spell that follows me!" wailed Snish. "No ship that I am aboard ever comes safe to port!"

The galley listed dangerously as the wave ebbed. The next foamed over the stern, and Theseus thought that they were going to sink. But the crest lifted the ship, drove it between two great rocks.

The hull lodged there. The higher waves poured over it, and filled the pit. Loosening timbers groaned to the battering of the sea. Soon, Theseus know, they would break apart. He peered to left of the far changing beacon, seeking the shadow of land.

Dawn presently revealed the hills of Crete, dark with cypress forests, marching across the south. Theseus cut loose a broken spar, knotted hand ropes to it, and rolled it over the side. Snish protested that he feared the water and had never learned to swim. Theseus dragged him from the wreck, towed him sputtering to the floating yard. The wind drifted them shoreward.

Peering back northward, Theseus saw the sun's rays pick out scattered black sails, tiny and distant. "The fleet!" he muttered. "Phaistro will soon be after us again."

The squat little wizard sat uneasily astride the drifting spar, and one brown arm—which still glittered with the green jade bracelets of Tai Leng—made an apprehensive gesture toward the shore.

"Phaistro's fleet is nothing," he croaked. "The real danger lies ahead.

For Talos, the giant of brass, patrols the coasts of Crete." The croak became a breathless whisper. "Captain—look!"

Far away toward Knossos, between the blue of the sea and the rising green of the hills, Theseus thought he saw a glancing flash that had the color of brass.

VII.

Snish slid fearfully off the spar into the sea. His squat brown body was shivering with cold and fear, his huge yellow eyes bulging out.

"My soul!" wheezed the little wizard. "My naked, helpless soul! Why did I let fate drive me out of peaceful Babylon? Captain Firebrand, we are doomed!"

"Don't drown yourself!" Theseus laughed, just a little uneasily. "That gleam was far off. Perhaps it was only the sun on some housewife's well-scoured pot."

Snish clung trembling to the ropes.

"I am wizard enough to know the sight of Talos," he croaked anxiously. "The brass man is fleet enough to patrol all the coasts of Crete from sunrise to sunset. And wizardry guides his eyes, so no intruders can escape him.

"Oh, if I had stayed a cobbler in far Babylon!"

He pulled himself up beside the spar, and his popping yellow eyes peered over it for a moment toward the shore. But nothing moved there, and he slipped back into the sea.

"I was a cobbler in Babylon," he wheezed. "But Babylon is an old city. Its empire has crumbled, and all its greatness is but a haunting memory. The caravans pass it by. And business is terrible."

He sighed, in the water. "Even the wizards in Babylon are poor, for they have no such power as the warlocks of Crete. There was one whose boots I patched for seven years, and he was never rich enough to pay even a copper bit upon his bill.

"It was he who taught me the small arts of wizardry that I know. One day when he brought his boots to be soled, I told him I had no leather and no money. He offered to teach me all his sorcery, if I would only sole the boots. And I did. But I had better remained a cobbler!" His hand quivered on the ropes. "For wizardry made me an exile from my own Babylon." His voice was a nasal sob. "It cursed me with this perversity of the elements. And now it is bringing the monster Talos down upon me!"

"But you are still a wizard!" Theseus was intently watching the dark shoreline, shading his eyes for another warning glint of brass. "And now I am going to call upon your wizardry. The Cretans have been warned that Captain Firebrand is destined to victory in the games, and all the fleet is hunting for him. But they know nothing of Gothung the Northman, who is the Gamecock's steersman. You saw him—a square-headed giant, with long yellow hair.

"Snish, give me Gothung's likeness!"

Waiting for the change, Theseus looked down at the little brown man shivering in the water. His sword belt began to feel uncomfortable, and he automatically let it out. A heavy strand of hair fell across his face. He saw that it was straw-yellow.

"It is done, Captain Firebrand," the little wizard wheezed. "But remember—the spell is feeble. A close touch—even a kiss—will make you the hunted pirate again."

Theseus was staring at his hands. They were not the lean hands he

knew, but huge as hams, sun-reddened, freckle-splotched, covered with white-bleached hair.

"Forget Captain Firebrand," he whispered. "I am Gothung the Northman—a simple mariner, wrecked on the coast of Crete." He looked down at Snish. "But what of your own guise?"

The little wizard sank lower in the water.

"Not in Crete!" he croaked. "The warlocks of Knossos are too many and too jealous. The peculiar welcome they reserve for visiting wizards is famous, even to Babylon." His teeth chattered. "And it is a ghastly thing! No, I am just the poor cobbler, Snish. And I shall attempt no sorcery, master, save what you demand of me."

THE WIND had carried them on toward the shore. The beach was no more than an arrow-flight ahead, when Snish pulled himself up beside the yard again, and his yellow face went lax with dread.

"Captain—Gothung!" he wheezed faintly. "It is Talos—coming around the headland!"

The little wizard had professed an inability to swim. But now he caught his breath and released the ropes and dived with the skill of an otter. The spar drifted on. Theseus watched the wooded point. And a gleaming metal giant came stalking into view, and waded out through the breakers.

Talos stood twice the height of a man. The metal of his huge body seemed pliant, living; the bright skin flexed as he moved. And the waves that struck his mighty legs hissed away in steam, so that Theseus knew he must have been uncommonly hot from his race to meet them.

"Man," a vast brazen voice reverberated across the surf, "who are you?"

The eyes of Talos were like holes into a furnace; their yellow glare was blinding. His immense bright face reflected a simple and terrible strength—a strength, Theseus thought, that lay chiefly in his metal thews. With the water bursting into white steam about his naked middle, he waited ahead of the spar.

Theseus looked again for Snish, and began to suspect that the little wizard had transformed himself into a fish. He cupped hands to his lips, and shouted back across the surf: "I am just a simple mariner, trying to reach land from the wreck yonder."

The burning eyes looked past him, toward the rocks, and the mighty voice of Talos boomed: "What ship is that?"

"That was a pirate," Theseus told him. "The magical wind of Minos drove it on the breakers last night. I was a prisoner, chained to the oars. I cried out to Minos and the Dark One, and they spared my life."

The fiery eyes of Talos came back to him. "Who was captain of the pirates?"

"He is a lean tall Achean, with red hair."

"Was his name Firebrand?"

"The pirates," said Theseus, "called him Captain Firebrand."

"Captain Firebrand!" The voice of Talos was like thunder. "Where is he now?"

"He lies on the wreck," shouted Theseus. "He was wounded in a battle with the fleet, and most of the pirates slain. He was running before the storm, to escape, when the ship went on the rocks. The mast fell across his legs, and pinned him to the deck. He cursed me, when I left him, and mocked the names of Minos and the Dark One."

Talos waded forward, with the water hissing higher about his bright hot body.

"That is his last folly," rolled the brazen voice. "For Minos knew that the pirate would approach this coast last night, and he sent me to destroy him."

The brass man abruptly halted, and his flaming eyes flashed cunningly.

"Talos is no fool," he boomed. "Are you not one of the pirates yourself, seeking to escape before the admiral takes you for the games or the Dark One?"

"Ask Captain Firebrand," advised Theseus, "when you find him."

"I shall ask him," roared the brass man, "before I pick the limbs from his body. And if you have lied to me you won't escape. For, mark you, Talos is no fool!"

He waded past the spar. The waves came hissing up over his shoulders. They made white steam about his head, and covered him. Briefly his bright head came up again, as he crossed a bar, and once more vanished.

THE SPAR touched gravel. Theseus splashed ashore. He looked back, wondering what had become of Snish. The little wizard popped out of the water and came stumbling up the beach. His seamed face was blue, and he sobbed painfully for breath.

"Splendid, Gothung!" he gasped. "You lie like a Cretan, already. But I thought I would drown before the brass man passed. Let's get out of sight before he returns."

They crossed a wide dusty trail, where enormous prints of metal feet were spaced three yards apart, and started climbing up the steep forested hill beyond. Theseus broke the way, and the short-legged wizard fell panting behind.

Presently a distant brazen reverberation reached Theseus, and there was a far-off crashing among the trees.

With a miraculous second wind, Snish overtook him. "Our brazen friend," he wheezed, grinning, "who is no fool!"

But Talos did not overtake them, and presently Theseus and his companion crossed the wooded summit and came into view of the valley beyond. Flocks grazed on grassy slopes. Low hills were green with vines and olives, and a stream, below, wandered through fields of wheat and barley. The bright-walled houses of a distant village peered through the groves.

"A beautiful land!" sighed Snish. "It is as fair as the plain about my own far-off Babylon."

"It is a beautiful land." The voice of Theseus was grim. "Its beauty slumbers, fast in the bonds of an evil wizardry. But we have come to set it free!"

They went on down into the valley. Snish begged Theseus to leave the Falling Star hidden beside the way. The sword was too splendid, he said, to be carried by any common shipwrecked mariner; it would betray them.

Theseus would not abandon the weapon. But he wound the inlaid hilt with a rawhide thong, to disguise it, and stained the bright blade with soot.

A shepherd gave them a breakfast of barley cakes and ripe cheese and sour wine. When they reached the village, Snish found the chief merchant of the place, and sold one of his green jade bracelets for a handful of silver shekels.

From the village they followed the westward road, toward Knossos. It was a good, stone-paved way. Trains

From the head the ancient wizard held, a bolt of blinding lightning flashed down—

of laden donkeys plodded along it, and sometimes they met a noble in chariot or palanquin.

As the wandering Northman, Theseus spoke to the travelers they met and the peasants toiling in their little fields and vineyards by the way. He found them a busy, pleasant folk; yet all of them were haunted, it seemed to him, with an unceasing dread of the dark powers that ruled Crete.

Terror came into their eyes when a Minoan priest went by, carried by silent slaves in a black-curtained litter. The blue pinch of hunger was on many faces, and some spoke hopelessly of crushing tithes and taxes. All the young folk hid, when a file of black lancers passed, lest they be seized to perish in the games at Knossos.

That night Theseus and the yellow wizard reached the highway that ran southward from Ekoros to Bandos, the second city of Crete, whose revenues were enjoyed by the noble Phaistro. They slept at an inn on the highway.

When they came out of the tavern, next morning, Snish gulped and stared at a notice that a scribe was painting on the plastered wall. The scribe signed it with the double ax of Minos, and Theseus read:

A reward of twenty talents of silver will be paid from the imperial treasury for the head of a certain Achean pirate, called the Firebrand, who was recently cast on the shore of Crete. The guild of magicians, in addition, offers half a talent of silver for the head of a minor Babylonian wizard, believed to be with the pirate.

Snish had turned a pallid green. Theseus caught his trembling arm, and led him out of the little circle of staring pack drivers and peasants, and down the road toward Knossos.

VIII.

Knossos, the dwelling of Minos, was itself a city. The greatest and oldest and most splendid palace in the world, it stood upon a low eminence beside the Kairatos River, three miles above the harbor town. Built and rebuilt for a thousand years, it covered six acres, and its mass rose five stories above the long central court. The wonders of it were known in every land, and the guarded magazines beneath it were rumored to hold the greatest treasure hoard ever gathered.

To seaward of Knossos lay the city of Ekoros, which was the metropolis of Crete. Scattered all about upon the low hills were the villas of the nobles, the great merchants, and the more powerful magicians, their gay-painted walls gleaming through groves of palms and olives.

The harbor town, below Ekoros, walled the river's mouth with docks and warehouses. There lay the trading ships that sailed to Egypt and Troy and Mycenae and Tiryns and a hundred other coasts, to carry wine and oil and purple cloth and bronze tools and the graceful pottery of Crete, to bring back silver and gold and amber and tin and furs from the north, copper and murex-purple from the islands, papyrus and incense and grain from Egypt, even silk and jade and pearls from the far-off east.

Theseus and Snish paused for a time where the road topped a hill, looking across at the vast rambling maze of the palace, and the crowded houses of sprawling Ekoros, and the busy shipping in the harbor beyond. At the outskirts of the city, below the palace, they could look down into a long oval bowl whose sides were tiers of seats.

"That must be the place of the

games," whispered Theseus. "I shall fight there. And, when I have won, all this will be mine!" He made a broad gesture, over the palace and the city and the harbor, and out toward the sea. "And the reign of the warlocks and the Dark One will be ended."

"Easy words," returned the cynical nasal voice of Snish. "But the doing will take more." His frog-face grinned. "How are you going to get into the games?"

"They are open to any who would challenge the reign of Minos."

"But none ever do," said Snish. "Now Minos is searching for Captain Firebrand, because he has a prescience of what might happen in the games. If you volunteer to fight, it will take no wizard to penetrate the guise of Gothung!"

Theseus tugged at the wide thick brush of his yellow beard.

"Then I'll not volunteer."

A woodcutter overtook them, driving two donkeys laden with faggots. They spoke a little with him, asking the questions that strangers would ask, and presently he pointed out a grove of olives upon a low hill.

"That is a sacred grove," he told them. "In the midst of it is a little temple, that covers the most ancient shrine in Crete." His voice lowered, and his gnarled fingers made a quick propitiatory gesture. "For it is there that the womb of the Earth-Mother opened, and Cybele came forth in her human likeness to be the mother of mankind."

His short whip cut viciously across the nearest donkey's rump.

"I have seen Ariadne," he boasted. "With her dove and her serpent, she comes to the shrine in a white-curtained palanquin." He cut at the other donkey's belly. "Ariadne is the daughter of Minos, and the vessel of Cybele. She is a sorceress, and a goddess, and her beauty is as blinding as the sun."

His brown face twisted into a leer.

"When my wood is sold," he told them, "I will have three drinks of strong wine, and then I am going to the temple of Cybele." He grinned, and his cracking whip brought blood from the nearest donkey's flank. "Three drinks of wine, and any temple slut becomes as beautiful as Ariadne."

THESEUS NODDED at the panting Snish, and they strode ahead again.

"Perhaps Ariadne is a goddess," he said softly. "But, nevertheless, she is going to be mine—for she is part of the prize that belongs to the victor in the games."

"Or a part of the bait," croaked Snish, "that the warlocks use to lure men into the arms of death!"

They crossed a stone bridge, and came into Ekoros. This was the poor section of the city, where dwelt the lesser artisans, small shopkeepers, and laborers from the docks. Flimsy buildings, three stories high, confined a powerful stench to the five-foot street.

Most of the street was a foul, brown mud, the rest a shallow open sewer in which a thin trickle of yellow slime ran through piles of decaying garbage and reeking manure. Flies made a dark cloud above the ditch, and their buzzing was an endless weary sound.

Gaunt women trudged through the mud with jars of water on their heads. Screaming hucksters carried little trays of fruits and cakes, that were brown with crawling flies. Blind beggars screamed for alms. Slatternly dark women screamed conversations out of windows and doorways. Naked brown babies, standing in the mud, screamed for no visible reason at all.

Or perhaps, Theseus guessed from their bloated bellies and pinched cheeks, they were hungry.

"Crete is a splendid empire." His voice rang hard above the shrieking din. "Knossos is the most splendid building on earth, crammed with treasures of art. The nobles and the merchants and the warlocks lounge in their green-shaded villas. But these are the people of Crete!"

"And a foul lot they are!" Snish held his nose. "They make even the slums of Babylon smell like a garden in bloom. We have money; let's get on to a better quarter."

He quickened his pace, but Theseus stopped him.

"Give me the money."

Reluctantly, Snish surrendered the little handful of tiny dump-shaped silver shekels. Theseus began buying the stocks of astonished hucksters, passing out dates and honey cakes to beggars and shrieking children. Intelligence of this incredible bounty spread swiftly, and soon the narrow street was packed. Snish tugged fearfully at the arm of Theseus.

"Caution, Gothung!" he croaked faintly. "Men with prices on their heads should not gather mobs about them. Come—"

A horn snarled, and his voice died. A hush fell upon the street, disturbed only by gasps and fearful murmurs. The silent mob began to melt past corners and into doorways. A woman slipped to the side of Theseus.

"Come with me," she whispered. "Hide in my room until the Etruscan guards are gone. I want a strong, brave man again. Once I was in the temple of Cybele. But the high priestess turned me out, because men said that I was more beautiful than Ariadne!"

Theseus looked at her. She was bent a little, and the white-powdered shoulders revealed by her open bodice were thin with years; the rouged face was hollow-eyed and haggard.

"Here is money." He dropped the rest of the rough silver coins into her lean hand. "But I am seeking Ariadne herself."

"You think I am too old." Bitterness cracked her voice, and her fingers closed like brown claws on the silver. "But Ariadne is ten times my age, and more! It is only sorcery that gives her the look of youth and beauty." She tugged at his arm. "But come," she urged, "before the goddess overhears our blasphemy. For here she is!"

Then the horn sounded again. The woman fled, lifting her flounced skirt from the splashing mud. Magically, the street had cleared. There was only a lame, naked child, that the rush had pushed into the gutter. It tried to run, fell, lay still, as if too frightened even to scream.

"Come, Gothung!" The voice of Snish was a husky rasp, and his face had turned yellow-green. "This street is no place for us."

Theseus shrugged off his clutching arm, strode back toward the silently sobbing child. But the horn blared again, and two black stallions came prancing around a bend in the street. They filled the narrow way, and the bronze greaves of their riders brushed against the walls on either side.

"Make way!" an angry voice barked above the jingle of spurs and bits. "Make way for the white palanquin of Ariadne!"

"Run!" Snish overtook Theseus. "The Etruscans—"

"But the child!"

Theseus ran back, toward the brown, naked infant, lying petrified with fear on the edge of the gutter.

He was too late. It shrieked once, under the great hoofs, and lay still again.

Trembling, Theseus snatched the bits and stopped the horse. He looked up at the swart, helmeted rider. Dark with anger, the Etruscan dropped the silver horn to its thong, tugged furiously at a long bronze sword.

"Wait," Theseus said softly. "Let the people get out of the way."

"Loose my bits, gutter rat!" roared the Etruscan. "For this outrage, you will be flung into the games."

"Probably," said Theseus. "But there is no haste."

The other horseman, meantime, had cleared his own saber. He swung down with it, savagely, at the bare, magically blond head of Theseus. But Theseus leaned under the neck of the horse he held. And the dark-stained Falling Star, whipping up, slashed the Etruscan's fingers and sent the bronze blade rattling into the gutter.

The wounded Etruscan made a bellow of rage and pain. The other jerked and spurred his mount, attempting to ride down Theseus. But Theseus clung to the bits, swung clear of the pawing hoofs. And the steel sword, with two swift strokes, severed girth and reins.

The saddle slid down the back of the rearing horse. The Etruscan sat down upon it, violently, in the open sewer. There was an unpleasant splash and a louder buzzing of flies. In a moment, however, the man was on his feet, gripping his saber and mouthing soldierly curses.

Theseus released the unsaddled horse, and crouched to meet the Etruscan. But steel had not touched bronze, when a woman's voice, clear and full as a golden bugle, pealed to them:

"Hold! Who halts my guard?"

Theseus saw that a rich palanquin, carried by four sturdy, panting slaves, had come up behind the disarmed horseman. The white curtains were drawn open, and its occupant was sitting up on her couch, to look out.

Ariadne!

ARIADNE of the white doves, sorceress of the serpent! The woman in the palanquin, Theseus knew, could be no other. Daughter of Minos, and divine vessel of the All-Mother, Cybele.

"Who dares halt Ariadne?"

Her proud voice was a golden melody. It touched an eager chord in the heart of Theseus, and he stood with wide eyes drinking in her loveliness.

Her skin was white, white as the dove on her smooth, bare shoulder. Her full lips were red as hot blood, her eyes green and cold as ice. And the hair that foamed about her shoulders was a flaming splendor.

Her hair was red, redder than the locks of Captain Firebrand had been. Soft lights rippled and flowed in the thick wavy masses of it. It was a cascade of shining glory, falling over her long, white body.

Theseus struggled for breath. He had sworn to win Ariadne, as a trophy of victory in the games. Now he made a hot renewal of the oath. He saw that she was worth all the storied wealth of Knossos, that her beauty was a power vast as the wizardry of Crete.

Briefly, Theseus wondered if she were as old as the woman of the street had said, and he saw a confirming shadow of wisdom and weariness in her cold, green eyes. And he thought that none but a goddess could ever have been so beautiful.

A gasping curse brought him back

to himself, and he found the unhorsed Etruscan close upon him. He crouched, and the Falling Star flashed out to parry the long bronze saber.

"Stop!" Ariadne's golden voice pealed out again. "Let him speak." The cool, green eyes surveyed Theseus haughtily. "The savage is clever with his blade. Ask him his name, and what he seeks in Crete."

"I have ears." Theseus rang his steel defiantly against the saber. "Tell her that I am Gothung, a wanderer from the north. Tell her that I came to Crete to hire my sword to Minos. But say that, having seen the people of Crete, I would fight for them instead."

Her splendid head tossed angrily, and she shouted:

"Call another detachment, and take the insolent Northman!"

Nursing bleeding fingers, the mounted man spurred his horse down the street. The one on foot came at Theseus, with bronze saber upflung. But the steel blade turned the stroke, a swift slash opened his arm to tendon and bone, and the saber dropped in the mud.

Theseus leaped forward, menaced the palanquin slaves.

"Set down the litter," he commanded.

At the point of red-dripping steel, they obeyed. Theseus ripped aside the white linen curtains, and looked in upon Ariadne. Clad in a flounced green gown, her long white body sprawled lazily on the cushions. Her cool green eyes met the hot eyes of Theseus, without hint of fear.

"When my rider comes back with aid, Northman," she said softly, "you will regret your insolence to a goddess."

"Meantime, I am the master." The flat voice of Theseus was equally soft. "And the All-Mother should display compassion. Get out." His red sword gestured. "Pick the dead child up out of the gutter."

She lay still, and the green eyes turned frosty.

"No man would dare!" she whispered.

The palanquin slaves gasped mutely as Theseus shifted the sword, and reached his red-dripping hand through the curtains. Her white arm went angrily tense under his fingers, but he dragged her out into the muddy street.

"Northman!" Her quivering words were almost soundless. "For this, you shall feed the Dark One!"

"Perhaps," said Theseus. "But pick up the body."

Tall, defiant, the red handprint bright on her skin, she made no move. Theseus shoved. She went sprawling sidewise into the sewer, thrust white hands into its reeking muck to check her fall.

Breathless, silent, she got slowly back to her feet. Flies swarmed dark about her, filth dripped from her hands and her gown. She tried to scramble out of the ditch. Theseus met her with his red steel.

"The child," he said, "All-Mother!"

For a moment her green eyes stared at him. They had turned dark, and something glittered in their frosty depths. Her dripping hands clenched, and slowly relaxed. Silently, then, she bent and lifted the small, brown body in her arms.

Theseus caught her elbow, helped her back to the palanquin.

"Thus, Cybele," he whispered, "you have begun to prove your motherhood. But the proof is not done, and we shall meet again when the games are played."

The red lips moved, but she spoke no word.

Another horn snarled, and the

drum of hoofs and the rattle of weapons came down the narrow street. Gripping the Falling Star, Theseus turned away from the white palanquin. He glimpsed the pallid face of Snish, peering furtively from the doorway of a wine shop.

"Well, cobbler," he shouted, "there was no need to volunteer!"

IX.

THESEUS made a necessary gesture toward his own defense. In fact, the Etruscans being the fighting men they were, he was able to make the gesture quite vigorous, with no danger of escape.

An officer in a chariot whose axle spanned the street, was followed by a dozen men on foot. He left the chariot at the corner, with a slave to hold the horses, and led six men up the street. The others vanished, and Theseus guessed that they were going around the block to take him from behind.

A dozen alleys and doorways beckoned, but he brushed the humming flies off his red hands, and waited quietly. Three tall, notched shields made a moving barrier, from wall to wall, and long bronze blades lifted through the notches.

Waiting, Theseus snatched another glimpse of Ariadne. One of the palanquin slaves stood ready to assist her back into the litter. But she was standing in the mud beside it, the child's brown body, dripping blood and filth, still clutched against her. Her green eyes were fixed on Theseus.

"Wait, slave!" Theseus caught her muted golden voice. "Let me see the Northman fight."

He fought. The Falling Star was thin and keen enough to probe far through the bull-hide shields, and the narrow slippery way hampered the rigid formation of the Etruscans. One man, and then another, slipped down behind the wall of shields.

If he had really sought escape, Theseus knew, he could have leaped through the wall when it wavered. But he waited for men to replace the fallen, waited for the second wall to form behind him. And he heard the ring of Ariadne's voice:

"Take the savage alive, for the games!"

The probing steel found a heart behind the second barrier. But the walls came inexorably together. Bronze blades reached Theseus, from before and behind. But it was a mace that reached over the rawhide wall, and crushed him out of consciousness.

With bitter mouth and splitting head, Theseus came back to life in a dungeon whose fetor was thicker than the street's. This was a square pit, twenty feet deep. The walls were polished, well-fitted stone, unscalable. A faint, gray light came through a grating in the roof.

Dimly, that light revealed his five companions, groaning or snoring on the bare stone floor. They were all condemned criminals, he learned, waiting for the games. A slave who had been indiscreet with his master's wife. A palace scullion who had got drunk and burned a roast. An unemployed carpenter who had stolen bread. Two merchants who had neglected to pay certain tithes to the Dark One. They were all hopeless as men already dead.

The pit was not a pleasant place. Water trickled down the walls, to make foul little pools on the porous gypsum floor. Sanitary arrangements did not exist. Molded bread and rotten meat were dropped at uncertain intervals through the grate. Time was marked by the daily fading of that faint, gray light.

DAYS dragged by, and Theseus knew that bad food and exposure were sapping even the rugged strength of Gothung. His body was stiff and ulcerated from sleeping on the foul wet stone, and monotony numbed his mind.

To fill the days, he began speculating upon the possibility of escape—even though this hard imprisonment was a thing that he had risked his life to gain.

"It can't be done," the scullion assured him. "In three hundred years, no man has escaped from the dungeons of Minos. We are stripped. We are not thrown even a bone, to serve as weapon or tool. The walls are strong masonry, and there is only living rock behind them. Only a fly could climb to the roof. And nothing much larger could pass through that bronze grate—which is locked with a wizard's secret."

"Still," Theseus insisted, "I believe I could escape even from such a pit as this—if it had to be done!"

They counted the days, until the moon of Minos, when the games would be observed. No word was spoken to them through the grate. Even when the carpenter died, after days of coughing, the guards ignored their calls. The body crumbled into a pool of decay.

The day arrived at last, the grate was unlocked, and lassos hissed down and caught them one by one. Theseus stood waiting under the door, while the others crouched moaning with dread in the corners, but he was the last taken.

The rope whipped under his arms, hauled him upward. Black-mantled Minoan priests dragged him down a dark stone corridor. A door opened, to make a square of dazzling light. Lances prodded him, and he walked out into blinding sun.

The dry heat was good to his naked body, stiff as it was from his wet stone bed, and caked with filth. The clean air was precious. For a moment it seemed enough to be out of the pit, and he forgot that this must be the moment for which he had planned and fought and endured the dungeon.

Weak from hunger and hardship, he stood swaying in the sun. It was a little time before he could see anything. But he felt hot, dry sand under his feet, and heard the deep-throated murmur of a great crowd. Somewhere a bull was bellowing. And his nostrils caught the faint sweet odor of blood.

Abruptly, behind him, bronze horns made a strident fanfare, and a harsh-voiced herald began a monotonous chant:

"This man, called Gothung the Northman, now enters the sacred cyclic games, to seek the throne of Minos. Therefore let him be faced with the nine trials, to test the will of the Dark One in his three aspects.

"For the Dark One is a deity of three aspects, bull and man and god. And if all the aspects of the Dark One shall favor the candidacy of this man, then he shall be seated upon the sacred throne of Minos, and wed to the All-Mother, Cybele, who dwells in Ariadne the daughter of Minos, and shall reign over all Crete as regent of the Dark One. And Minos shall go into the Labyrinth to meet the deity who has disowned him.

"But if the Dark One fails to show favor to this man, in any aspect, then he shall die, and his carcass shall be flung into the Labyrinth so that the Dark One may feast upon his craven soul."

BY THE TIME that the herald was done, Theseus could see. This was the same oval bowl that he and

Snish had marked from the hill. Blood splotched the blinding white sand that spread the long arena. The seats above the curving wall were crowded with the upper tenth of the hundred thousand of Ekoros.

Apprehensively, Theseus searched for the gleaming brazen bulk of Talos. For the brass giant, having met him as he came ashore and listened to the lie about Captain Firebrand, might—if he really were no fool—penetrate the guise of Gothung. But Talos was not in sight.

Hopefully, then, Theseus looked for Snish. Since the little wizard had not come to share his dungeon, Theseus believed that he must have escaped, might be useful again. But Snish, he knew, had courage for no real risk. He was not surprised when he failed to discover the little Babylonian.

Above the center of the arena he found a section of curtained boxes, and glimpsed faces that he knew. He saw the sallow, hawk-nosed visage of Amur the Hittite, and the thin, dark face of Admiral Phaistro. He even caught the husky, excited voice of the Hittite:

"Half a talent, that the first bull kills the Northman!"

Flashing past them, the eyes of Theseus found Ariadne. She sat apart, in a white-curtained box. A white dove rested on her bare white shoulder. Her green gown heightened the green of her eyes.

She was watching him, fixedly. A curious, eager smile touched her smooth, white face. Her flaming head made a lazy little nod, as if of satisfaction. Her smooth arm beckoned to one of the busy slaves, bearing the yellow arm bands of Amur, who were taking wagers.

"Three talents," she called softly, "that the Northman dies in the first three trials."

Theseus dragged his eyes, with an effort, away from her haunting and insolent beauty. He found a black-curtained box beyond her. And his heart checked when he knew that he looked at last upon the dreaded warlock who had ruled Crete for twenty generations.

Curiously, Minos looked like neither wizard nor king. He was a short, fat man, and the hands folded in the lap of his white silk robe were short-fingered, plump, pink, and dimpled. His face was round and red and dimpled, too, his eyes small and blue and merry. Perfectly white, fine as a woman's, his hair was long and daintily dressed. His pink, plump arms were laden with silver bracelets.

Theseus stared again. For this looked like the sort of man who would keep a tiny shop, and be always poor from giving dates and honey cakes to children. He didn't look like the wizard-god who held half the world in cruel subjection. But he was.

Then something moved in the rear of the curtained box, and Theseus saw another figure. A gaunt, stooped man, all in black, with a seamed, shrunken face that was like dark wax, and hollow, flaming eyes. The cadaverous face, the whole dark-swathed frame, carried an impression of leering, sinister power. Here was one who looked like a warlock, and doubtless was. For this, Theseus guessed, was the dreaded and infamous Daedalus.

The two spoke briefly in the box. Theseus heard their voices. That of Minos was soft and limpid as a woman's, silver-sweet. The tones of the other were sepulchral, with a cold, rasping harshness that set Theseus to shivering.

They used the secret priestly tongue, so that Theseus could not

understand. But in a moment Minos beckoned to one of the slaves, and the woman-voice said softly:

"Nine talents on the Northman —one that he wins each game!"

Then Theseus shuddered indeed. Had these warlocks already pierced his guise? Were they merely playing a game? Else why did Minos calmly wager on the loss of his empire? Theseus searched that genial dimpled face. The small blue eyes of Minos twinkled back at him merrily.

X.

SILVER HORNS snarled again, at the lips of three black-robed priests. And the harsh voice of the herald rang once more across the sun-flooded, hushed arena:

"First let the challenger test the will of the Dark One in his aspect of the bull. The first three steps are three wild bulls from Thessaly, and their horns will show the Dark One's will."

Bull-leaping, Theseus knew from the tales he had heard, was the dangerous national sport of Crete. The performers, usually slaves or captives, required years of training. Often, on less solemn occasions, this same arena must have been devoted to that sport.

A dark passage opened in the end of the arena, and a great black bull lumbered out upon the blinding white sand. Its mighty head was flung high, and the sun gleamed on its cruel polished horns.

Standing naked on the hot sand, Theseus found time to recall Cretan paintings that showed bull-vaulting scenes. The daring acrobat seized the horns of the charging bull, to be lifted gracefully over the animal. He wished briefly that he had been trained in that perilous art, but he had not.

The bull stopped, stood for a moment as if bewildered by the walls and the watching thousands. Its bellow was a deep, ominous sound. It pawed up a cloud of sand, dropped its horns to gore the earth.

Then its eyes discovered the lone straight figure of Theseus, and it charged. Theseus waited, motionless. His senses seemed queerly sharpened. He felt the dry hot grains of sand under the bare soles of his feet, and the sting of the sun, and the sticky legs of a fly crawling up his abdomen.

Time seemed oddly slowed. He felt aware of every watching eye, and found time even for a glance toward Ariadne. She was leaning forward in the white-curtained box, white face intent, cool green eyes fixed on him. He thought of her wager that the bulls would kill him, and shouted a taunt at her:

"All-Mother, remember your child!"

There was no time to see her response, however, for the bull was upon him. He caught his breath, and set his feet in the hot sand, and tensed the great lean body of Gothung. He wished that he were not so stiff and weak from the dungeon, for the thing he had to do required a quick, smooth-flowing strength.

Theseus was untrained in bull-vaulting. But he had traveled through Thessaly. He had seen the half-savage Thessalonian herdsmen seize a charging bull by the horns, and throw it with a clever twist. He had even tried the thing himself.

It took but half a heartbeat. The wide-spaced grasp upon the curving horns. The twist aside. The sudden thrust of all his weight upon the leverage of the horns. But he had never thrown such a mighty beast as this.

Under the hot black skin, tre-

mendous muscles resisted. The horns surged up, to toss him. Every thew of tall Gothung's body was strained. But the huge head twisted aside. The weight of the bull finished the thing, and the very momentum of the charge. The animal went down in a kicking pile.

Theseus walked out of the little cloud of dust, and breathed again. His limbs were trembling. In spite of the sun, a quick sweat made him a little cold. Standing relaxed, watching the bull, he caught voices from the vast murmur of the crowd:

"But he can't throw three!" . . . "See, he is weak and shaking already!" . . . "Ten to one the first man kills him, if he escapes the bulls." . . . "No man has won in a thousand years!" . . . "No man will ever win!"

The bull struggled back to its feet. It stood with lowered head, bellowing and pawing up sand. But it did not charge again. Presently the horns blared, and the herald shouted:

"Gothung the Northman has survived the first test, by the Dark One in his aspect of the bull. Gothung has mounted one step toward the throne of Minos. Therefore let him try the second step."

A WIDE GATE was opened at the arena's farther end. Light-footed professional bull-vaulters, with their red mantles, lured the first bull through it. The gate was closed, and the second admitted.

The second bull refused to fight. If Theseus had run, it might have pursued him. But he stood still in the center of the arena, weak with hunger and the strain of his first contest, while the animal ran around and around the wall, seeking escape.

The thousands jeered it. The bull-vaulters hurled barbed javelins into its black hide in an effort to infuriate it. But it merely ran the faster, and at last leaped over the gate and escaped from the arena.

The third, however, was made of more deadly stuff. It lowered its head without a sound, and came with a savage rush at Theseus. Theseus crouched again, and spread his hands to grasp the horns.

But they twisted, evaded his fingers. The bull swerved. The horns made a vicious slash. A keen point raked across the ribs of Theseus. Pain staggered him. He stood swaying as the bull wheeled beyond him, came back. Again the horns escaped his hands, caught his thigh.

The beast wheeled and charged again. This time he knew its way. His hands were waiting, and that quick deceptive twist brought the horns into them. He flung all his strength, not against the savage thrust of that mighty head, but with it. The bull went down. One horn plowed deep into the sand, and the head turned back under the body. There was the sharp little crack of a snapping spine, and it lay still.

Theseus swayed aside, quivering from the effort, gasping for breath. The sun was driving, merciless. The white sand began to move in slow undulations under him, like a sea of white fire. The red marks the horns had left on chest and thigh were dully painful, and flies sought them.

A deep awed whisper had come from the mob on the piled tiers of seats. Now, reeling, Theseus listened to the talk as the bets were laid again. The boxes were close above him. Without looking, he knew the golden voice of Ariadne:

"Three more talents, that the men kill him!"

"Taken, daughter." It was the silken voice of Minos himself.

"Three talents that he lives to face the gods."

Theseus shuddered, and covered his eyes against the searing sun. Was his guise in vain? Was his victory in the games already anticipated—and provided against—by this fat, dimpled, merry-eyed man whose sinister magic had ruled Crete for ten centuries?

The horns made a thin far sound, and the herald's voice seemed to waver and fade upon the hot air:

"The bull is dead. In the aspect of the bull, the Dark One looks with favor upon the candidacy of Gothung the Northman. He has mounted three steps toward the throne of Minos. Now let him test the will of the Dark One in his aspect of the man."

A yoke of black oxen dragged the dead bull out of the arena. Theseus waited, giddy with the heat. His mouth was bitter and dry. It was no great wonder, he reflected, that no man had won these games in a thousand years. The bugles whined again, and a dark Nubian boxer came into the arena.

THE MAN was gigantic, naked but for tight belt and loincloth, long muscles gliding beautifully under oiled gleaming skin. A heavy, leathern helmet protected his head. His hands were heavy with copper-weighted leather cesti—cruel things, that could crush a skull like an egg.

Theseus stood waiting for him, fighting a silent battle with heat and hunger and fatigue. The Nubian crouched, came in. The deadly fists thrust like rams. One caught the arm of Theseus with a bruising shock. The other grazed his head, with staggering pain.

Bare fists were quicker than the loaded ones, but not quick enough. Theseus struck again for the dark shining body. But the Nubian rolled aside, caught his shoulder with a swinging cestus.

Theseus ducked, feinted, danced away. But he was reeling. He wanted to drop on the hot sand, relax, forget, let the black end this agony. The evil power of Minos no longer mattered to him. He had no desire for the rich plunder of Knossos, nor even Ariadne's white beauty.

But—he mustn't fail!

Somehow, he made himself stand again to face the grinning Nubian. He groped for something through the vagueness of his spinning brain. He found it. A trick he had learned, painfully, from a camel driver who had come with a silk caravan from the east.

He tensed his quivering body, crouched, waited. The Nubian struck again. He caught the dark wrist, ridged with the thongs that held the cestus. He twisted, then, dragging the slick oiled arm over his back. A blow on the neck stagered him. But he kept his grip, lunged, bent.

Twisted sidewise from his feet, the Nubian went spinning over the shoulder of Theseus. Released with a final well-timed fling, he came down upon the helmeted head. There was another small muffled snap in the arena, and the boxer was dead.

Black oxen dragged away the body. Horns snarled, and the herald cried:

"Gothung has mounted the fourth step. Let him strive again, with the aspect of the Dark One that is man."

There was a murmur in the crowd. Giddy, reeling, breathless, Theseus did not look up. But he caught the lowered husky voice of Amur the Hittite:

"If Minos is betting on the Northman, I am through. An honest man can't wager with wizards! I'll lay

you fifty talents that they have already seen the final victory, in their spheres of time!"

Theseus shared the same uneasy suspicion. Blinking against the sun, he found the merry blue eyes of Minos again, and wondered what mockery lay beyond their twinkle. He saw Ariadne, impatient and white, with three talents on his death. And again he glimpsed that gnarled dark figure, in the box behind Minos, and caught the glare of sunken, evil eyes. He shivered once more to the feel of cold, supernal power.

The horns whined again, and Theseus waited. Desperately, he wanted a drink of water. He closed his eyes against the glaring sand, and saw the shaded pool in Attica where he had learned so long ago to swim. Flies clustered about the smarting scratches on his chest and thigh, grimy sweat ran down into his eyes. And at last the second man entered the arena.

THIS WAS a swart, little Cretan marine, with his weighted net and bronze-pronged trident. He trotted out watchfully across the sand, spinning the net into a blurring circle. Theseus wished for the good hilt of the Falling Star in his hand, and flexed his empty fingers.

The Cretan circled him cautiously, ran in abruptly, flung the net. But Theseus, watching his narrowed dark eyes, had seen warning of the effort. He crouched, reached out, caught the spinning web.

Once, on Captain Firebrand's pirate galley, a captured marine had paid for his life with instruction in all the tricks of net play. Theseus dropped to his knees upon the sand. But he kept the net spinning, and held its weighted cords from whipping about his limbs, and tossed it back to meet the Cretan.

The marine had lunged after the cast net, with both hands on his trident. The returned net tangled it, tripped him. Theseus caught the trident, dragged it out of clutching hands, reversed it. A bronze point ripped the Cretan's breast and shoulder.

"Do you yield?" Theseus demanded.

White with pain, the man half-lifted himself. Theseus stopped him, with the prongs against his throat. Faintly, then, he gasped:

"I yield."

And he sprawled back on the sand, dead. Theseus dropped the trident and stumbled back from him. He was cold with a shuddering wonderment. He knew that wound had not been fatal.

The horns shrilled. The herald made announcement that the Northman had mounted the fifth step toward the throne. Black oxen returned to drag off the dead marine. Theseus waited, too weary to slap at the flies on his wounds. And at last the third man came into the arena.

This champion of the Dark One was a tall, harsh-visaged Etruscan —one of the wandering warrior race that Minos had brought from the north coasts to guard his throne. Shining bronze plated his helmet and his greaves. He carried a notched shield nearly as tall as himself, and a long bronze sword.

Theseus reeled, staring at the glitter of the sun on that sword. He fought down a brief desire to fling himself upon it, and find a swift, clean end to all his weariness and pain. He brushed the flies away, and fumbled dimly for another plan.

There was a long dark blot on the sand, where the bulls must have killed another victim. That might

be useful. Because he had to go on. Not for the throne of Minos, nor the loot of Knossos, nor even Ariadne's insolent beauty. But for a naked brown baby, it seemed, crying in a gutter.

The Etruscan's shield was heavy. Weary as he was, Theseus could move fast enough to keep out of the way for a little time, until he got trapped in a corner. He retreated, turned, paused, fled again.

The Etruscan ran after him, panting, sweating, cursing. The sun was blinding on the helmet and the sword. Theseus passed the dark pool of blood, passed it again, and a third time. But the mercenary avoided it. It was the few drops the dead marine had spilled that set him at last to stumbling.

Theseus stopped, stooped, whirled back. Trembling fingers caught a bronze-greaved leg, lifted. The Etruscan sprawled flat on his back, beneath the long shield. The bare heel of Theseus came down on his elbow, and the bronze sword dropped. Theseus snatched the weapon, swung it high.

But he did not strike.

For Minos, in the black-curtained box, had risen suddenly. His rosy cheeks still dimpled genially, and his small blue eyes were merry. But he lifted a round pink arm, in a gesture of annoyance. A blinding blue bolt whipped out of his empty fingers. Authentic thunder crashed. Smelling of burned leather and seared flesh, the struggling Etruscan fell again.

XI.

THESEUS stood reeling, staring up into those jolly eyes. The dazzling sand rocked again, and the ruddy dimpled smile of Minos was suspended before him like a mask of jovial merriment, against a flaming haze of weariness and pain. He thought that one twinkling eye winked at him, and Minos sat down again.

Despite the sun's dry sting, Theseus felt cold. This thing was proof enough, it seemed to him, that Minos was actually a god, that he in fact commanded the lightning. How, he wondered, was any winner of these contests to make good his claims, against such powers? Was that the meaning of the wink?

Theseus had hoped that the priests and the people would insist on fair play with the winner. But the awed hush that followed that crashing bolt seemed proof enough of Minos' absolute dominion. Theseus could expect no aid.

Few contestants, Theseus guessed, had ever mounted so far toward the throne of Minos. For the seated thousands were leaning forward, breathless, white-faced, staring. Even the voice of the herald had gone hoarse and unsure:

"Gothung the Northman has been favored to mount the throne of Minos, by the Dark One in his aspects of bull and man. Therefore let the Northman now test the will of the Dark One in his sublime aspect of the god."

The horns whined again.

"Gothung will stand and wait at the center of the arena. First let him determine the will of the Dark One through Cybele, daughter of the Dark One and mother of men, whose vessel is the fair Ariadne."

Swaying, bewildered, Theseus stumbled to the middle of the arena. He found the outline of the sacred double ax of Minos, marked with black sand poured upon the white, and stood upon it. Half blinded with the glare of sun on sand, he stood there, watching Ariadne, wondering what the next test would be.

The silver horns sounded again.

Green-eyed Ariadne rose lazily in her white-curtained box. She tossed her head, to send ruddy flame-tresses rippling back, and strolled with an insolent grace out upon a long railed platform that ran before the boxes. The sun turned her long white body to gleaming marble, shimmered green on her daring gown.

The white dove clung to her bare shoulder, fluttering to keep its balance when she moved. The girdle about her thin waist, Theseus saw, was fashioned in the shape of a silver serpent. It seemed to writhe, oddly, as if it were alive—perhaps, Theseus thought, his uncovered head was getting too much sun.

A fat red-robed priestess brought Ariadne a long white bow, and another offered her a full quiver of arrows. Displaying a strength and skill surprising to Theseus, she strung the bow, tested its pull, let the string twang viciously.

Carefully she selected a long, green-feathered arrow from the quiver, nocked it, then stood for a little moment watching Theseus. Her voice rang out, clear as a golden horn:

"Northman, I am glad you have lived to try the steps of the gods. For Cybele has her own quarrel with you."

The drive of the sun was an intolerable searing thrust and Theseus felt a prickling over all his skin, and a weakness in his limbs. His throat was painful and parched, but he managed to shout hoarsely:

"And I have a lesson for Cybele. The All-Mother should not kill, but love."

He saw color, then, in the whiteness of her face. The red splendor of her head made a little angry toss. Slowly, with a splendid strength, she drew the bow, pulled the arrow to her cheek. And her clear voice pealed:

"Even Cybele can slay!"

SOMETHING, even in that breathless moment, drew the eyes of Theseus from her tall beauty and her peril. Something made him look high above the curtained boxes. There, in the topmost tier of seats, he glimpsed the face of Snish.

The seamed ugly features of the little Babylonian were stiff and pallid. And his hands came up, with an odd swift gesture, as if to fend the arrow from himself. Could—or would—the little wizard help?

The glance of Theseus fled back to Ariadne. The sun gleamed on the silver scales of the serpent-girdle, and he thought the bright coils tightened around her. The dove fluttered white wings. And the bow twanged.

Theseus had dodged arrows. He tried to drop flat, at the sound of the string, in hope that the shaft might pass above him. But he couldn't move!

His weary body was held rigid, above that sand-laid outline of the double ax, as if he had been bound to an invisible post. Now he had met the gods—and their wizardry!

But it was an angry defiance that sprang into him, and not a fear. His head set grimly, and his open eyes looked straight to meet the hissing shaft. The warlocks might chain his body, but his mind still fought!

The arrow whispered by his ear!

Free of the invisible bonds, Theseus swayed. A trembling looseness came into his knees, and he wanted to sit down on the burning sand. He shaded his eyes, stared up at the boxes, where an uneasy murmuring ran.

He was incredulous. He could

have sworn that the arrow was drawn straight at his right eye. Her practiced stance had told him that Ariadne was a well-skilled archer. Nor could he suspect that, for any possible reason, she had deliberately spared him.

For all color had left her lovely face again. The splendor of her head was high with anger. The green light of her eyes turned dark, dangerous. She turned swiftly to her red-robed priestess, reaching for another arrow.

The soft woman's voice of Minos stopped her.

"Stay, daughter! The Dark One guided your arrow, and it missed. The Northman has mounted the seventh step toward my throne."

From the quiver carried by the fat, black-clad servant, Ariadne took an arrow. With a deadly-smooth grace she nocked it, raised the bow—

The small eyes danced genially. "Let him try the eighth."

THE DIMPLES deepened as Minos smiled; his fat pink hands made a little gesture to the herald and the priests. Thoroughly puzzled—and still with a deep, invincible apprehension of this stout merry man and his power—Theseus looked up across the silent throng again, and found the wrinkled, wide-mouthed face of Snish.

The yellow popeyes of the little wizard were staring at him. And one of them deliberately winked! Was it Snish, whose arts had deflected the arrow? With a sudden fear that his eyes would betray the Babylonian, Theseus looked swiftly away from him.

The horns keened again, and the herald shouted:

"Now let the Northman test the will of the Dark One through the great Minos, who is his son, and his regent over the earth."

The unseen fetters, Theseus discovered, held his body again, so that he stood unable to move upon the black sign of the double ax. He stood in the blaze of sun, lightheaded, helpless, watching.

Minos stood up, and came out of the black-curtained box, to the platform where Ariadne had stood. For all his plumpness, he moved with a surprising ease and vigor; he almost bounced.

He slipped off the white robe, tossed it to a slave. Bare except for belt and loincloth, his hairless body looked pink and firm. His middle showed evidence of good living, but there was no hint anywhere of a thousand years' decay. His rosy cheeks dimpled to a genial smile, and the small blue eyes twinkled down at Theseus. He might have been the priest of some small deity of wine and song, placing his blessing upon a night of carnival.

"So, Northman, you seek my throne?" Bright laughter bubbled in his woman-voice. "Let the Dark One choose!"

A black-robed priest knelt before him on the platform, offered him with bowed head something long and bent and black. It was a stick of ancient ebony, Theseus saw, curved on one side and flattened on the other, longer than the pink arm of Minos. It was polished to the gleam of glass.

Minos took the bomerang, with a firm and easy grasp. His preliminary swing was strong and free. His pink face smiled like a happy child's, and his blue eyes sparkled warmly. Yet the careful swiftness of his motions convinced Theseus that the eighth test was going to be a very real one.

"O Dark One," he called softly. "Choose!"

With a long and powerful sweep of the round pink arm, he threw the boomerang. Unable to move, Theseus stood on the black emblem of the double ax, watching with defiant level eyes.

For one heartbeat, he knew that it was hurtling straight toward his head. Straight. It was going to hit him. Then, abruptly, making a savage *whi-whi-whi*, it flashed past his head. Another incredible miss!

But a boomerang returns.

Theseus still could not turn his head. But, watching the faces of the thousands before him, he saw them follow the spinning weapon beyond him, up, back. He heard the hissing whistle of it again.

Heard it, once more, pass him!

It lifted a little puff of white sand before him, danced away like a graceful, live thing, dropped and lay still. Theseus looked up at the rosy face of Minos. It held the same dim-

pled smile. He waited for a slave to replace the white robe about his shoulders, bounced back into the dark-curtained box.

Horns shrilled again, and the herald croaked:

"The Northman has mounted eight steps toward the throne. Through Minos himself, the Dark One indicates favor. There remains the ninth test. The Northman will learn the final will of the Dark One, through Daedalus the wizard, who is his high priest, his hand, and his voice."

THE HEART of Theseus was beginning to skip. The blazing white sand spun about him, until he felt that he was floating in a sea of white searing fire. His fatigue was gone. His body was a dead and distant thing; the itch and sting of the flies on his wounds had ceased to matter.

Dimly, he tried to remember what was happening. He had a dim, vague hope that he might escape this final danger, but he couldn't recall what he must do next. He watched Daedalus through a screen of unreality.

The warlock came out of the curtained box, and shed his own black robe. If Minos had looked amazingly young, Daedalus was very old—and yet incredibly strong. His body was dark, hairy, shrunken, gnarled like some ancient tree.

Beneath stringy black hair, his face was creased into wrinkles no few centuries could have wrought. It was waxen, hollow, skeletal. His eyes were deeply sunken, black, flaming with a sinister power. Lean dark claws of fingers raked through his stringy black beard.

While the horns whined again, black-robed priests brought the warlock a leather-thonged sling and a bright, heavy little copper ball. Staring at the ball with those flaming hollow eyes, Daedalus muttered over it, fitted it at last to the socket of the sling.

The sling spun about his head. Hard muscles knotted and quivered, jerking his lean twisted frame swiftly and more swiftly. He was like a dwarfed mountain oak, Theseus thought, battered and shaken in a savage wind. The sling became a blurred wheel of motion. The leather thongs murmured, sighed, screamed.

Theseus found strength again to test his unseen fetters. They held him. But they made no difference now, he thought. For no man could hope to dodge that screaming shot.

It came—whined harmlessly by!

The invisible bonds were abruptly loosed. Theseus pitched to bare knees on the baking white sand, and the whole arena rocked. He saw the baleful malice that twisted the gnarled, evil face of Daedalus, saw him limp angrily back into the dark-curtained box.

Horns shrilled, and the herald stepped forward again. He was pale and perspiring. He tried thrice to speak, gulped thrice for his voice, croaked faintly at last:

"Gothung the Northman has mounted the nine steps to the throne of Minos. In his three aspects, of bull and man and god, the Dark One has shown favor. The tests are done, and Gothung the Northman is chosen to ascend the throne!"

Faint as that voice was, every word rang clear through the brittle tensity of silence that that fallen upon the vast arena. There was a long, intolerable moment of suspension. Swaying on his knees, Theseus watched the bland chubby face of Minos, and his heart was still with dread of another lightning bolt.

But the pink baby-face of Minos dimpled again, his blue eyes shone

merrily, and jovial laughter sparked beneath his silken voice:

"Rise, Northman, and take the throne!"

The rosy arm made a little gesture, and Theseus followed it toward the end of the arena. What he saw sent a swift cold tremor through every limb. The massive gate had opened again. Talos, the brazen giant, was striding toward him over the sand

XII.

THESEUS DRAGGED himself once more to his feet, on the black spinning outline of the double ax. His quivering limbs were weak with apprehension of some new and treacherous attack. But there was nothing, he thought, that he could do against the brass might of Talos.

He waited, feeling the quiver of the sand to the tread of Talos. The twelve-foot shining giant came up to him. The fiery eyes looked down, filled with simple cunning, and the hollow voice rumbled:

"I remember you, Gothung the Northman. I spoke with you when you came ashore from the wrecked galley of the pirate Firebrand." His chuckle was an immense deep reverberation. "And I know you still. For Talos is no fool!"

Theseus felt that Captain Firebrand, just now, was a very dangerous subject. He contrived to stand on the hot sand, swaying. He had no idea what to expect—except fresh peril! The hushed, startled crowd had no look of a people greeting a new ruler. It seemed insane to think that Minos would willingly surrender the throne.

Anxiously, in quest of further aid, his eyes roved up across the tiers of seats, to where he had seen Snish. But the little wizard, as he half expected, had vanished again. If Snish indeed had taken a hand in the games, that was all he could expect. He looked back, with concealed apprehension, into the flame-yellow eyes of Talos.

"Well?" His voice was faint and dry. "What do you want?"

"Master, now you are going to be the new Minos." The words of Talos were a throbbing roll of brazen sound. "And I shall be your slave. I have come to serve you."

"Then," whispered Theseus, "show me the way to the throne I have won."

"Wait, master," rumbled Talos.

A breathless quiet still filled the long bowl. There was not even a whisper, save from Minos and Daedalus and Ariadne. Those three had come together on the little platform from which they had launched arrow and boomerang and shot. They spoke together furtively in the secret language, and at last Minos called something to the herald.

The horns keened a last fanfare, and the herald shouted hoarsely:

"Let Gothung the Northman come now to the palace of Knossos. Let him bathe, and rest from the ardor of the trials he has passed. At sunset, let him come to the sacred hall of the double ax.

"There he will receive all that the favor of the Dark One has bestowed upon him. The robe of Minos will be placed upon his shoulders, and he will take his place among the gods. Cybele will be wed to him. And he will take up the double ax of war and peace that is the sign of the Dark One's regency."

Theseus touched the hot, smooth brass thigh of Talos.

"Tell them," he whispered, "that I shall do that."

The great voice boomed out obediently.

"Now," breathed Theseus, "lead

the way to Knossos! I shall follow you."

Talos stalked back toward the massive gate, and Theseus staggered after him. It took all his strength to walk. Yet he contrived to stride boldly, to hold his yellow head high. Even if he should die now, he thought, from some warlock's trick, or a cowardly blade in his back, it would be in the midst of a triumph that must at least have shaken the power of Minos.

As he moved, a hushed and voiceless sound ran among the still-seated thousands. It seemed to hold a breathless surprise. There was relief in it, and dread. And also, Theseus thought, disappointment.

The great portal was opened for them at the end of the arena. Theseus paused for a moment in it, looked back. The crowd was beginning to rise, with an increasing murmur of awed and excited voices. Minos and Daedalus and Ariadne had gone.

THESEUS followed the long strides of the brass man through the streets of Ekoros, toward the mighty pile of Knossos. This was a rich suburb, far different from the squalid quarter where he had met the palanquin of Ariadne.

The stone-paved streets were wider, clean-swept. There were no open sewers, no naked babies playing. High stone walls shut the villas away from the road, and only the trees of secluded gardens looked above them.

Evidently a rumor of the outcome of the games had already passed through the town. For the street was clear. The only people Theseus saw were lying on their faces in the intersecting alleys. A hushed silence followed him. Only once, from a huddle of rags, a woman's thin voice quivered out:

"Oh, new Minos! Pity your people, in their want. Clothe them, in their nakedness. Feed them, in their starvation. Remember that you were human once, and spare them from the terror of your power!"

Even when they came to the long mass of the palace, upon its low eminence, none appeared to greet them. Theseus heard only distant whispers and far, hurried steps, merely glimpsed fearful figures hastening down dark endless corridors.

For all his anxiety and fatigue, he felt an awe at the vastness and the splendor of Knossos. The intricacies of its courts and corridors and light-wells and stairs and piled-up rooms bewildered him. But everywhere were rich tapestries, matchless frescoes, jars of purple gypsum—marks of wealth that woke Captain Firebrand in him.

"What a place," he murmured, "for us to loot!"

The floor beams creaked rather ominously beneath the tread of Talos. But he guided Theseus through the hushed corridors, and across an immense, flagstone-paved central court, and down a wide stair toward the river.

His fatigue half forgotten, Theseus was staring with a breathless elation at all the rich splendor they passed. It was his! He had won it, in the games. And it was going to be formally bestowed on him, after sunset —unless some warlock's trick intervened!

But not his for long, he knew. For he had won it, not for himself, but for the people of Crete, and his own Attica, and all the world. His next task—if, indeed, he had won anything—was to crush the priests and warlocks, end the cruel worship of

the Dark One, shatter the reign of wizardry.

Then—well, the long habit of wandering had grown too strong to be easily broken. There was Egypt, with ancient wonders of its own. There were the strange far lands of the East. And, doubtless, other stranger lands beyond them.

Talos stopped beside a doorway.

"These rooms are yours, master," he boomed softly. "The slaves within will bathe you, serve all your needs. Rest until the sun has set. I shall wait by the door."

And Talos abruptly became perfectly motionless, in an odd way he had, so that he looked precisely like a huge statue of polished brass. Simple cunning was set upon his huge bright face, and the flame-yellow eyes stared fixedly.

THESEUS WALKED wearily past him, into a rich apartment, illuminated from a white-plastered light-shaft. The walls were bright with lively scenes from the arena, graceful youths and girls vaulting over savage bulls. The cool rooms were furnished in the richly simple Cretan fashion, with rugs and low couches.

Two slaves showed him into the bathroom, lifted him into a long bronze tub. Dissolving the grime of dungeon and arena, the hot soapy water felt very good. He didn't even mind the sting of it in his shallow wounds. He was beginning to feel very sleepy.

For a few moments his attention was held by the novelties of running water, drains, and a toilet that flushed. But his eyes were half closed when the slaves lifted him out of the tub. They toweled him, rubbed fragrant oil over his wounds, carried him to a low couch. He was sound asleep before he touched it.

It was dusk when Theseus woke, and a slave was entering with a flaring clay lamp. He sat up on the couch. His body had stiffened, the wounds were throbbing and swollen, and he felt a ravenous hunger. But no food was offered him.

"Come, Northman," rolled the deep voice of Talos. "The gods are waiting for you, in the sacred hall."

Still naked, Theseus rose and followed the brass man again. Flaming wicks lit the way. Once more they traversed the maze of courts and corridors and stairs, bewildering with the afterthoughts and alterations and additions of a thousand years. Theseus glimpsed slaves, kneeling as they passed, and said to Talos:

"Tell them to follow me."

"That is forbidden," the brass man rumbled. "Only the royalty, nobles, warlocks, and rich may enter the hall of the double ax."

"It is forbidden no longer," Theseus said. "For I am claiming the throne for the people of Crete, and I want them to be present. Bid them follow—all the artisans and slaves."

Talos looked back, his bright simple face perplexed.

"Minos would not like that."

"But I am the new Minos," Theseus said, "and I command it."

Still doubtful, the great voice of Talos boomed out the call. Theseus was aware of hushed and apprehensive steps, following behind them.

At last they came into the solemn vastness of the sacred hall, whose huge square columns were graven with the double ax. Weirdly colored flames leaped above tripod braziers shaped like bulls' heads. A black-curtained altar was covered with a white cloth, and a polished ancient ax of black obsidian lay upon it. Black-robed priests knelt beside it. Before it, robed in white and black, stood Minos and Daedalus.

Talos halted before them, rumbled:

"Here is Gothung the Northman, who was today chosen by the Dark One to take the throne. He is ready."

Standing beside him—suddenly extremely conscious of his empty-handed nakedness—Theseus looked into the face of Minos. It smiled back at him, dimpling, and the small eyes, in the flickering light of the braziers, seemed to twinkle with an expansive merriment. Minos looked past Theseus, at the slaves and artisans filing silently into the hall. He chuckled, and his silken voice said:

"Scourge them out!"

But Theseus lifted a protesting arm.

"Stop! I called them to follow me. For they are the people of Crete, and they are going to be the new rulers. I claim the throne for them. I warn you now that the reign of the warlocks and the Dark One is ended!"

White-robe and black looked at one another. The gnarled dark face was inscrutable as the dimpled rosy one. It seemed to Theseus, however, that an unholy glee had flamed for a moment in the hollow black eyes of Daedalus. But Minos smiled again.

"Let them stay," he said softly, "and see their god!"

THE kneeling priests began a low, solemn chant, in the secret tongue. The wizard Daedalus, his hollow voice choked and snarling, called:

"Come forward, Gothung the Northman. Receive the vestments of Minos, take your divine bride, accept the double ax of the Dark One, and assume your place among the gods."

Striving to conceal a shiver of apprehension, Theseus went forward to the altar. At a signal from Daedalus, he knelt before it. Chanting in the secret tongue, the warlock lifted the white robe from the shoulders of Minos, draped it over him. The priests were abruptly silent. Rising, Theseus felt a hush of expectancy, saw eyes seek a dark doorway beyond the altar.

He looked, and Ariadne entered. She carried a silver lamp, and its rays shone red in the glory of her hair, white on her proud face, green on her long, loose robe. The white dove was fluttering on her shoulder. She came around the altar, and walked with a regal grace toward Theseus.

Theseus watched her face. It was white, frozen. Her features were cold as some lovely marble statue's, her green eyes dark and frosty with a scornful hate. She paused before Theseus, looking beyond him. The sepulchral voice of Daedalus croaked:

"Through Ariadne, who is her vessel, daughter of Minos and sorceress of the serpent, the All-Mother Cybele takes him who was Gothung the Northman to be her honored husband, and welcomes him into the circle of the gods."

Ariadne stood proud and straight before Theseus, and still her cold angry eyes refused to see him. The dark claws of Daedalus lifted away the loose robe. She was left in a sea-green gown, whose tight scanty bodice revealed all her womanly splendor.

The deep rusty voice of Daedalus rang hollowly: "Do you, Ariadne, the vessel of Cybele, take this new god to your heart?"

The white dove fluttered back to the shoulder of Ariadne, and the silver serpent writhed about her waist. Its eyes were crimson gems,

Theseus saw, that glittered evilly. Her golden voice faint and cold, she said: "I take him."

Theseus stood still, and saw a pale flush come up into her white skin. He relaxed a little, and dared to grin at her helpless wrath. Things were proceeding unexpectedly well. But Daedalus croaked at Ariadne:

"Then greet the new god with a wifely kiss—for you are now his bride."

The face of Ariadne went whitely tense, and the green eyes flamed. Theseus grinned again.

"We have already quarreled over the duties of motherhood," he told Daedalus. "Let us now forgive her womanly temper. I shall find time presently to teach her the obligations of a wife."

The warlock's gnarled face twisted into a black mask of hate. His sunken smoldering eyes stared for a long time at Theseus, as if their sinister power would consume him. At last he turned, shaken as if with a stifled fury, to the stone ax on the altar.

"Being the hand of the Dark One," he croaked hoarsely, "I offer the new Minos the sacred ax, whose twin blades are the crafts of war and the arts of peace, that is the token of the Dark One's regency." He reached for the worn ancient haft, but:

"Stop!" hissed the silken voice of Minos. "He is not yet a god!"

THERE WAS something impish in the rosy, dimpled smile, and the merry little eyes sparkled with an unwonted glee. Pink and stout without his robe, Minos bounced to the side of his daughter, whispered softly.

Apprehensively watching, Theseus saw the frigid white features of Ariadne break into a dazzling smile. She looked back at him, and her green eyes flamed a merciless triumph. Eagerly, her golden voice pealed:

"Wait! I see my duty. The new god shall have the salutation that is due him!"

Eagerly, she came back to Theseus. The white dove fluttered for balance, and ruby eyes glittered from the twisting serpent-girdle. Smooth and white and warm, her arms slid around the tense shoulders of Theseus.

"My divine master!" Her voice was a golden taunt, suave mockery shone in her long green eyes. "A kiss!"

Theseus knew that Minos had trapped him. Desperately he sought escape. He caught the smooth shoulders of Ariadne, thrust her roughly back.

"You refused it," he said. "Now wait till I am ready."

But Minos smiled his pink baby-smile, and the blue eyes twinkled. And Theseus discovered abruptly that he was held fast by unseen bonds, as he had been in the arena.

"Now, my lord." The eyes of Ariadne sparkled. "One kiss!"

Her long white body pressed close to his again, and he could make no move. Deliberately, her hot red lips sought his own, clung. Theseus abruptly felt the slackening of her arms, the new looseness of the white robe of Minos. And Ariadne stepped back from him, with mimic astonishment on her white face.

"Who are you, redhead?" her whisper mocked him. "And where is the godly spouse of Cybele?"

Released from those fetters of wizardry, Theseus looked despairingly down at his hands. They were lean and tanned—his own, not the huge sunburned hams of the Northman. They clenched, impotently.

He heard the soft faint tinkle of the laughter of Minos.

"Here, Talos!" whispered the silken woman-voice. "Here is the prisoner you have sought—the pirate Firebrand! He has stolen my robe! Seize him! Throw him into the deepest dungeon, to await the justice of the Dark One."

With a triumphant snarling sound, Daedalus tore the white robe from Theseus, wrapped it back about the pink pudgy shoulders of Minos. The ruler was trembling with soft laughter, and the small merry eyes were almost hidden in his rosy smile.

"But we were placing my successor on the throne," he sobbed through the laughter. "Where is the Northman?"

The floor creaked, as Talos strode toward Theseus. In the instant that was left to him, Theseus seized Ariadne, crushed her long body against him so hard she gasped with pain. "This is not the end," he breathed, "my bride!"

Deep within him, however, he feared that it was. He recalled the calm wager of Minos on Gothung. Suddenly he was certain that the rosy, jovial little warlock had penetrated his guise at the beginning, that his victory in the arena and this delayed exposure had been but an idle gambit—a game to break the tedium that thirty generations of life must become.

The hot resistless hand of Talos crushed down on the arm of Theseus, dragged him away. Looking back, he saw that Minos still quivered with laughter. Ariadne was staring after him with a curious startled expression, her face white as the fluttering dove.

TO BE CONTINUED.

THE DRUG THAT KILLS THE SOUL

In Central America there is a cactus poison which has a most peculiar effect on the mind and body. When a concoction of this plant is given to a person to drink he becomes an obedient slave without a will or mind of his own.

Following the administration of this drink the victim goes into a profound state of catalepsy which resembles death. He is buried as dead, but if removed from his grave within twenty-four hours he may be recalled to a pseudolike existence: the nervous system is numbed into mechanical activity; mind and will are gone and all tasks are performed automatically.

This is the drug that makes zombies, the living-dead men who are employed on plantations in various Central American countries. Salt is the only antidote to this poison, and it is kept out of their diet.

One Easter Sunday a woman was left on a plantation to look after the zombies. Being anxious to go to a neighboring village to see a parade, she took the zombies with her. These living-dead sat down in the market place and watched the procession with unseeing eyes. She bought a few sugar buns for the zombies, assuring herself they contained no salt. But she forgot to notice one thing. The pistachio nuts with which they were topped had been rolled in salt.

After eating them the zombies recovered their normal senses. They got up and marched away to their native villages. Their relatives thinking them dead, either greeted them joyfully or shrank back in terror.

EDWARD PODOLSKY.

PHILTERED POWER

by MALCOLM JAMESON

This is why, no doubt, love-philters, power-getters and magician-alchemists in general went out of style. An indubitable and scholarly—if slightly hilarious—discussion.

Illustrated by M. Isip

IF!

If the State's gold mines had not played out, the assay office would not have become the sinecure it was.

If the State had had an efficient government, the job would have been abolished decades before, instead of remaining one of the choicest plums

at the disposal of the Hannigan machine. And *if* Doc Tannent had been any sort of chemist and had not been such a colorless, shy and helpless individual, he might have been able to hold a regular job somewhere and not be compelled to sponge on his wife's brother from time to time. And *if* the brother-in-law had not been a clever lawyer and therefore able to get something on Hannigan, he would never have been in the position to demand that Hannigan "do something" for the estimable but ineffectual Doc Tannent.

So it was that Doc Tannent became State assayist.

Now, that is one of the cushiest, most innocuous berths in the United States, and there should have been no reason why the good doctor should not have settled down and enjoyed himself in idleness for the remainder of his life. If only the roof had not leaked, and if it had not been that he had the dizziest, most scatterbrained assistant assayist in the whole country to help him do nothing, the startling events of that summer would never have come about. Or even granting those two accessory "ifs," if Doc had been a golf player, no harm would have come of the appointment.

But he wasn't. He loathed golf. And, as the bard so charmingly puts it, thereby hangs a tale.

Doc Tannent was willing to have a soft job, but the assay office exceeded all expectations in that direction. There was absolutely nothing to do. There was no mail, no rocks to analyze or any chemicals to do it with. Except for keeping office hours and signing the pay roll twice a month, Doc had no duties—except, of course, the forwarding of the ten-percent "contribution" to Hannigan as he cashed each of his pay checks.

His helper, Elmer Dufoy, ne'er-do-well nephew of a United States senator, swept the place when the spirit moved him, or on rare occasions dusted off the tops of the obsolete books on metallurgy that graced the office's library. The laboratory was kept closed and locked, and the cases of mineral specimens in the halls needed no attention. When Elmer was not skylarking with the girls in the adjutant general's office across the road, he sometimes mixed up batches of a foul-smelling compound which his kid brother later peddled to farmers as horse liniment.

Such was the layout of the assay office, and such was the situation when Doc Tannent took over. He inspected his plant the first day, moved his belongings into his private office the next, and on the third day he became bored. For, for all his ineptness as a chemist and a human being, Doc was full of energy and liked to be doing something, if only pottering away at aimless experiments. So, being bored and having an ancient, disused laboratory at his elbow, Doc took up a hobby—a scientific hobby—and not golf, which is a much more efficient and safer method of killing time. That turned out to be a mistake, as Doc himself would be the first to admit, if it were not for the fact that today he is confined to the padded cell of Ward 8B of the State Hospital, complaining bitterly because no one will kill him as he deserves, or let him kill himself.

In the beginning he did not take the giddy Elmer into his confidence. All Elmer knew was that many strange parcels and boxes kept arriving and that Doc chose to unpack them himself and stow their con-

tents away in the privacy of his own sanctum.

But one day a case arrived marked "Open Without Delay—Perishable," and since Doc was not in, Elmer undertook to unpack it, and looked for a place to put its contents. To his astonishment, the box was filled with recently dead frogs, and while he was still staring goggle-eyed at the heap of limp amphibians, little Doc Tannent came bustling in. Around Elmer, Doc did not exhibit the bashfulness and stammering he was noted for before strangers.

"Come, come," he said sharply, "get a jar and put them on the shelf beside the scorpions."

Shaking his head and muttering Elmer unlocked the gloomy laboratory and found a jar. An hour later he had finished helping Doc rearrange the curious contents of the private office, which Doc had rigged up for his experimentation.

Along one wall was a row of bins, and over them were shelves cluttered with jars and tins, and every container in the room bore a strange label. Such things were in Doc's hoard as camel's dung, powdered dried eyeballs of newts, tarantula fangs, dried bats' blood and tiger tendons. In the bottles were smelly concoctions marked "Theriac" this and that, and there were jugs filled with stuff like "Elixir of Ponie" and "Tincture Vervain," and there was a small beaker labeled "Pearl Solution." In addition there were tins of dried scorpions and crumbled serpent skins, and many more jars containing the organs of small animals, and each of them had a legend which described the animal and the time and circumstances of its death. One that Doc seemed to value highly read: "Gall of Black Cat. Killed in a churchyard on St. John's Eve; Moon new, Mars ascendant." It struck Elmer as a wee bit spooky, smacking of necromancy.

"Thank you," said Doc, when the queer substances had been neatly put in order. "A little later, when I have made more progress, I may ask you to help me now and then with my researches."

Elmer went away, mystified by the strange slant his new boss had taken. The last assay officer had not been that kind of scientist. He was a mathematician—had a system for doping out the chances of the ponies in today's race—and spent all his time tabulating track statistics and running the resultant data through some weird algebraic formulas. Elmer hadn't any too much respect for his various chiefs, as most of their hobbies worked out badly. He knew, for it had been his job to run down to the corner cigar store and place the former assayist's bets. He had picked up a nice piece of change a few times by placing a bet of his own—the boss' choice to lose.

"Another nut," he confided to Bettie Ellsworth, filing clerk for the adjutant general, but Bettie was not particularly impressed. It was axiomatic that anyone accepting the assayship would be a nut. So what?

Doc and Elmer broke the ice between them the day the long box arrived from Iceland. Elmer got the pinch bar and nail puller and ripped the cover off. Inside was a slender something wrapped in burlap and wire, and the invoice said: "One eight-foot unicorn horn, Grade A. Guaranteed by International Alchemical Supply, Inc." Elmer's eyes bugged at that. So! Magic and wizardry was Doc's racket. Alchemy!

But he shucked off the burlap and stood the thing up. It was a taper-

ing ivory rod indented by a spiral groove running around it—obviously a tusk of the narwhale. Elmer had had to pass the civil-service test, being only an assistant, and knew a thing or two about elementary science, even if his uncle was a United States senator.

"Spu-spu-spu-splendid," stuttered Doc, delighted at its arrival. "Now I can go to work. Saw off a couple of feet of that and pulverize it for me—and get that heavy iron mortar and pestle out of the metallurgical lab. You'll need it. And be sure you keep the unicorn flour clean—impurities might spoil the outcome."

"O. K.," said Elmer, gayly, dashing off to the lab. He remembered vaguely that miraculous things could be done by alchemy and he had hopes that Doc might teach him a few tricks.

The next day Doc put him to work making a salve out of an aggregation of dried lizards, eagle claws, rose petals, rabbit fur and other such ingredients. While Elmer was stirring the mess in some gluey solvent, Doc dragged down a few of the big books he had bought recently, and laid them about the room, opened with markers lying in them. Then he set a beaker of greenish fluid to boil and scuttled from one of the huge tomes to another, writing copious memoranda on a pad of paper.

"You may think that alchemy is a lot of foolishness, Elmer," said Doc, as he sprinkled a handful of chopped cockscombs into the malodorous mixture boiling in the beaker, "and so it is—a blend of superstition and pompous nonsense. But some of these prescriptions were used for centuries to treat the sick, and believe it or not, some of them were actually helpful. I grant you that with most of the patients it made no difference whatever, and a sizable number of the others died, but why did some recover?"

Elmer shook his head, not stopping his whistling as he churned and kneaded the filthy compound under his mixing pestle.

"Unknown to the alchemists of the Middle Ages, some of the ingredients they used actually had therapeutic value. Take the Chinese. They brewed a tea from dried toads' skins and gave it to sufferers from heart trouble. It helped. That is because there are some glands in the neck of a frog that secrete a hormone something like digitalis, and that is what did the trick. Maybe there is something in the superstition held by some savages that eating the vital organs of your enemy makes you fiercer and stronger. Why not? When they ate the other fellow's kidneys, they ate his adrenal glands along with them. That ought to pep up anybody.

"This work I'm doing may bring to light some hormone we haven't discovered yet. Classical chemists say, of course, that there is no point in mixing these prescriptions—that all the ingredients have been analyzed and that those that are of any use are already in our pharmacopœia. But to my mind that is an inadequate argument. Analysis of metals tells you very little about the properties of alloys made by mixing them. So it is with these things. We have to mix them up and see what we get. That is the only way."

"Uh-huh," grunted Elmer, then sneezed violently. His annual attack of hay fever had announced its onset.

"Watch out," cautioned Doc, in some concern. "The humors, as they were called, of the body have a profound effect on these mixtures.

Many of them call for human blood, or spittle, or such things. See, I have a bottle here of my own blood that I drained out of my arm for use wherever it is called for. So don't go sneezing into that salve—you might change its properties altogether."

"Yes, sir," moaned Elmer, and dragged out his handkerchief.

ELMER DUFOY let himself into Doc's office that night with his passkey and, after carefully shrouding the windows, turned on the light. It was the first time in the history of the assay office that any of its employees had worked overtime, but Elmer had a reason. He had peeked into one of Doc's big books and seen a page that stirred him strangely.

His courtship of Bettie Ellsworth was not going too smoothly. There was a hated rival, for one thing, and Bettie was naturally coy, for another. The page that had caught Elmer's eye was headed this way: "Love Potions and Philters. How the Spurned Suitor May Win the Coldest Damsel," and there followed similar provocative subtitles. Elmer's heart vibrated with expectancy as he hauled down the weighty volume and hastily scanned the pages.

He found what he was looking for, scribbled some notes and assembled the equipment. He robbed Doc's jars and bins of the necessary components of the stuff he was about to brew. He rigged a still, having already learned that that was the modern counterpart of the "alembic" the ancient tome called for. He found an aludel, and an athanor, and by midnight his love potion was sizzling away merrily. Even through his hay-fever-stricken nostrils he could tell it was potent. Anything that smelled like that must have a lot of power.

At last the time came for the personal touch, and Elmer jabbed a finger with his penknife and let the blood trickle slowly into a measuring glass. He added the few drams required, set the beaker on the window sill to cool, and idly strolled up and down the room, thinking contentedly of how easy the conquest of Bettie was going to be. After a while he thrummed through some of the other books to see what formulas they might contain.

There was the "Zekerboni" of Pierre Mora, books by Friar Bacon, Basilius Valentinus, Sendigovius, Rhasis and other outlandish names. He came upon four massive volumes by one Phillippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim and found that the short for it was Paracelsus. There were books in medieval German, Latin, and what looked to him like shorthand, but what a notation on the flyleaf said was Arabic.

He might have looked farther, but his solution had cooled and the hour was late. He drew off the clear liquid, as the directions prescribed, filtered it through powdered unicorn horn and added the four drops of a certain tincture. Then he bottled it and slipped it into his pocket, well satisfied that a happy home for life was to be his lot, commencing with tomorrow.

Although he had every confidence that he had followed the directions to the letter, he was not thoroughly convinced of the efficacy of his potion until he had administered it to his victim and seen with his own eyes the consequences. That night, sleepy as he was, he took her to a show and to a soda fountain afterward. Quickly, once when she turned her head away, he dumped the potion into her ice-cream soda. He watched eagerly as the liquid in

the glass slowly began to fall, drawn away through the straw clamped between the two desired ruby lips.

"I think you're cute," she remarked, irrelevantly, after the first sip.

When the glass was half empty she suddenly bounced off her stool and flung her arms about his neck, kissing him wildly. "I love you, I love you, you wonderful boy!" she exclaimed, disregarding the other customers in the place.

"Drink it all, honey," said Elmer, grabbing the check and making ready for a fast getaway. They could discuss the rest of it somewhere other than the drugstore. There were a lot of people in the place.

Doc Tannent congratulated Elmer absent-mindedly when his helper informed him he was about to be married. Something new had turned up to make the assay officer preoccupied. The roof was leaking, and badly. Eight pounds of rare herbs had been spoiled by the water from the last rain, and two lots of salts ruined. The superintendent of public buildings had been over and after a look around shook his head. A new roof was needed, and that meant an appropriation. See Hannigan, was his suggestion.

It was at that time that the convention of the Coalition Party was due to be held in Cartersburg, and Hannigan would, of course, be there, as well as the governor, the members of the legislature and all the other politicos, both big shots and small fry. The annual convention was the whole works, as far as the government of the State was concerned. New office holders were picked and nominated, the pulse of the people was taken and new taxes were decided upon. The winter's legislation was planned, contracts were promised and appropriations doled out.

It was Hannigan's show, from first to last, and nobody else's. He made and broke everybody, from the governor down to the dog catchers; he decided what the people would stand for, and inside those limits he took a cut on every dollar the State took in and had another slice out of every cent the State paid out. When you wanted to get anything, you saw Hannigan, no matter who was the nominal boss. And Hannigan, a political boss of the old school, heavy-paunched and heavy-jowled, was no man to trifle with. "What's in it for me?" was his invariable question before discussing any subject, and he would tip the derby hat more on the back of his head, take a fresh bite on his fat, black cigar, and glare at the petitioner. If the answer was satisfactory, there would be a cynical wink, a slap on the back, and the matter was as good as done.

Doc Tannent's timidity and general incapacity came back on him with full force the moment it was suggested he go see Hannigan about the roof.

"Oh, let it go," he would say, whenever Elmer prodded him about it, for he dreaded the encounter with the wily politician at Cartersburg. But then it would rain again and his office would nearly get afloat. Elmer was thinking, too, of his approaching marriage. He wanted a raise, and wanted it so badly he was willing to kick in twenty percent of the gain in order to get it.

"Hannigan won't bite you," urged Elmer, wise in the way of the State's routine. "Just talk up to him. Lay your cards on the table; you don't have to be squeamish about mentioning money. He'll rebuild the building and double our salaries if you put it up the right way. If you

hit a snag, send me a telegram. In a pinch my uncle might put in a word for us."

In the end Doc went, leaving Elmer, sniffling and sneezing, to hold down the assay office in his absence. Four days later Elmer received a doleful letter from his chief, stating in rather elaborate and antiquated English that he was being subjected to what the more terse moderns would simply call the "run-around." He hadn't been able to get near Hannigan. They had shunted him from one committee to another, and nobody would promise anything.

Elmer frowned at the letter as his vision of the little love nest he had planned began to dwindle. He was reaching for the phone to try to contact his powerful uncle in Washington when the happy thought hit him. Alchemy had got him a bride, why not the raise? He dropped everything and began a frenzied search of Doc's queer library.

WHAT he wanted was not in Paracelsus nor yet in Sendigovius. He ran through many volumes before he found the Elizabethan translation of an obscure treatise written by a Portuguese monk. It dealt with charms and amulets chiefly, but there was a section on potions. Elmer sighed happily when he turned a page and saw staring him in the face the following caption: "For Courtiers and Supplicants Desirous of Winning the Favour of Monarchs and Potentates."

That was it. What he wanted exactly, for he knew from a letterhead that Hannigan was Grand Potentate of the Mystic Order of the Benevolent Phoenix. It was a natural, so to speak—supplicant, favor, and potentate—all the elements were there. He began scanning the list of ingredients.

That night he brought Bettie to the laboratory with him. She loved him so hard she could not bear to have him out of her sight. Together they mixed up the brew that was to make Hannigan eat out of Doc's hand.

First there was the heart of a dove, no color specified, to be stewed in the fat of a red bullock, calcined in an aludel with the kidney of a white hare and some virgin wax, and the resulting mess was to be treated elaborately in a retort together with sesame, ground pearls, and dill. Dill puzzled him until Bettie looked it up in another book and found out it came from a plant called *Anethum Graveolans*. The book explained that a pale-yellow aromatic oil was distilled from the seeds, and that it was good for flatulence.

"That ought not to hurt Doc or Hannigan either," grinned Elmer, when he found out that flatulence meant "windiness."

He dumped his mixture into a container, added the correct quantity of Doc's own blood, which was fortunately available, and shoved it into the queer antique furnace Doc had built and called an athanor. That was, as the directions said, "to rid it of its dross and bring it to a state of quintessence most pure." Patiently, hand in hand, the two lovebirds regulated the heat of the athanor as the sticky mess went through the successive states of purgation, sublimation, coagulation, assation, reverberation, dissolution, and finally descension.

It was midnight when the "descension" was completed, and after carefully blowing his nose Elmer broke the crust on his crucible and began to draw off the pale moss-green oil that was in it. There was enough to almost fill an eight-ounce bottle. It must have been of the

quintessence most pure, for the stuff put in originally, counting a couple of pints of Theriac, would have filled a top hat. Elmer was very well pleased with himself. The Aromatick Unction looked exactly as the book said it should look. He tried to judge the odor of it, but his sense of smell was hopelessly wrecked by his hay fever.

"What do you think?" he asked, pushing the bottle under Bettie's nose.

"I think," said Bettie, with pronounced enthusiasm, "that Dr. Tannent is the wisest, kindest, most deserving man in the whole, whole world, and I would give him anything I owned. Why, he's—"

"Don't you think you're just a little susceptible, hon?" growled Elmer, not pleased at the implied comparison. Then he remembered that ice-cream soda. It was the potion! He couldn't smell it, but she could. He had hit another bull's-eye!

"Come on, baby, get your bag packed. We're going to Cartersburg."

ON THE BUS Elmer studied the instructions. The alchemist who had first hit on the prescription evidently had thought of everything. The chances were that any courtier needing such a potion to get what he wanted was also in bad with the king, so that it was made potent enough to work through the air. The subject was to anoint himself thoroughly with the unction, and also carry a small vial of it in his hand. Properly prepared, the stuff would cause sentries and guards to bow reverently and make way, and it was solemnly assured that, once in the presence of the potentate, anything he asked would be granted. In proper strength, anything he wished for, even, would be granted without the asking.

"The raise is in the bag," Elmer told Bettie, giving her a little hug.

When they got to Cartersburg they found to their dismay that the convention had already met for the main event of the week—the nomination of the next governor—and the hall was packed to the doors. There was no admission without special tickets, and all those with authority to issue the tickets were already in the hall. Doc Tannent, apparently, was in there, too, perhaps still trying vainly to get in touch with Hannigan. Elmer considered anointing himself with the unction until he remembered that it was Doc's blood, not his, that was in the compound. Whatever effect it had would benefit only Doc.

He tried to get in the side door by slipping the doorman a little change, but the doorman said nothing doing. He took a try at the basement, but a gruff janitor shooed him away. Elmer backed away from the building and studied it from the far side of the street. That was when he noted the intake for the big blower fan on the roof, and saw that it was an easy step onto the parapet by it from the next-door office building. He grabbed Bettie's hand and made for the entrance to the office building.

They had little trouble getting into the intake duct. It was a huge affair of sheet metal, obviously part of the air-conditioning system, and its outer opening was guarded by coarse wire netting to keep out the bigger particles of trash, such as leaves and flying papers. Elmer, without a moment's hesitation, yanked out his knife and cut away an opening. He figured there would be a door into the duct somewhere to allow access

to it for cleaners coming from the inside of the hall.

Elmer led the way, gingerly holding the bottle in one hand while clinging to the slippery wall of the duct with the other. Bettie stumbled along behind. It got darker as they went deeper, but presently Elmer saw the cleaning door he was looking for, only it was behind yet another filter, which meant another cutting job to do. A few yards beyond the door an enormous blower was sucking air into the auditorium, and the draft created by it was so strong that they were hard put at times to hold their footing on the slick metal deck under them. But Elmer tore at the second screen and worked his way through the opening in it.

For a moment he was convulsed with a miserable fit of sneezing and coughing, for in ripping apart the screen he had dislodged much dust. Then he started swearing softly but steadily. Bettie crawled through the hole after him and cuddled up to him consolingly.

"Whassa matta, sweeticums?" she cooed.

"Dropped the damn bottle," he snuffled, "and it busted all to hell."

He had. He struck some matches, but the wind blew them out. Then he worked the cleaning door open and a little light came in. All there was at his feet were some bits of broken glass—not so much as a smell of the precious Aromatick Unction was left. Elmer looked sheepishly at the remnants, and then, in an effort at being philosophical, he said:

"Oh, what the hell! Come on, as long as we're here, let's watch 'em nominate the new governor. It's fun to see the way Hannigan builds up his stooges. A coupla speeches is all it takes to turn a stuffed shirt into a statesman."

They wandered around the attic for five minutes or so before they found the steps that led down to the gallery of the hall. The gallery was packed, and they couldn't see at first because everybody there was jumping up and down and yelling his head off. That was surprising, for it generally took a nominating convention a couple of hours to get past the dry introductions before they uncorked their enthusiasm and really went to town. Then Elmer recognized that the yelling had settled down to a steady chanting. He heard the words, but didn't believe them—not at first. It just couldn't be. But what the crowd was calling, over and over again, were the words:

"We want Tannent! We want Tannent! We want Tannent!"

Then they stopped the yelling in unison and let go, every fellow for himself, in what is technically known as an ovation. A high voice from down on the main floor sang out, "Tannent—ain't he wonderful!" and right away the whole auditorium took that up and made it into another chant.

Elmer gave a startled look at Bettie, but she was as bad as the rest. He marveled that he had ever thought her beautiful when he looked at her red face, eyes bulging, and the veins standing out all over. She was yelling her lungs out for Tannent. A man on the other side slapped Elmer on the back and said something about what a grand guy Tannent was and what a swell governor he would make, and how happy he was to be able to vote for him. It was all so silly.

Elmer deserted Bettie and fought his way down the aisle until he reached the rail where he could look down onto the main floor. The band was playing "For He's a Jolly Good

Fellow" and the shouting had reached heights of insane frenzy. Something unprecedented had stampeded this convention, and Elmer, as soon as he had taken the precaution to blow his nose once more and dab the water out of his bleary eyes, hung over the rail and tried to spot the center of the commotion.

He found it. Big Tim Hannigan was plowing his way through the dense crowd beneath. Doc Tannent was sitting piggyback on top of the boss' shoulders, smiling and bowing and waving to the crowd! Men went crazy as he passed, trying to get at him to shake his hand. Elmer went crazy, too—with amazement.

And then he tumbled. It was his philter—his potion to soften up the potentate and make him give what was asked for. When it had been spilled in the air intake, the conditioning system had spread it through the auditorium and everybody was affected. They were trying to give Doc what he wanted. It didn't matter what—just whatever he wanted. "Tell us, Doc," yelled one delegate, "what'll you have? If we've got it, it's yours!" It was a powerful philter. Not a doubt of that.

By that time the bigwigs were on the rostrum—Hannigan, the incumbent governor and some others. There was Doc, his bald head glistening and his little goatee bobbing up and down, making a speech of some sort, and not stammering while he did it, either. Hannigan, the big grafting gorilla, was at one side, beaming down on Doc with exactly the expression on his face that a fond mother wears when her baby boy steps out onto the stage at a parent-teacher's meeting to say a piece. And Hannigan's wasn't the only mug there like that. Everybody else looked the same way. Even the hard-boiled, sophisticated newspaper boys fell for the philter. The slush they sent their services that night cost several of them their jobs.

THE old governor broke three or four gavels, pounding for order, but finally got enough quiet to scream out a few words. Elmer suddenly realized that Doc Tannent had already been nominated for governor; the hubbub he was witnessing was the celebration of it. Or maybe the crowd, in their unbridled enthusiasm, merely *thought* they had nominated him for governor. At any rate, this is what the old governor said:

"Please! Please! Let me say one word—"

(The crowd: "Go jump in the lake—scram—we want Tannent!"

"—I realize my administration

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has been a poor thing, but it was the best I could do. Now that we have nominated a *real* governor—"

(The crowd: "*Whee!* Hooray for Tannent!")

"—I resign here and now, to make way for him."

The crowd cut loose then and made its previous performance seem tame and lukewarm by comparison. Some kill-joy, probably another man with a bad cold, jumped up and remarked that the resignation of the governor accomplished nothing except the elevation of the old lieutenant governor to the highest office of the State. Whereupon the lieutenant governor promptly rose, flung his arms around Doc, and then announced that he had appointed Doc to be lieutenant governor. Whereupon *he* resigned. That made Doc the actual, constitutional governor—on the spot.

There was a brief flurry that marked the ejection of the kill-joy from the hall, and then the assembled delegates cast the last vestiges of reserve aside and proceeded to voice their happiness. The steel trusses overhead trembled with the vibration, and the walls shook.

Doc was governor! Elmer was stunned. He had wrought more than he intended. That "quintessence most pure" must have been simply crawling with hormones favorable to Doc.

But there was more to come. In the orgy of giving Doc what he wanted, or what they thought he wanted, the legislature resigned, one by one.

Then Doc appointed their successors on the spur of the moment —according to what system no one could guess. But nobody was sane enough to want to guess—except Elmer, and he was too astonished to think about a little thing like that.

What nearly bowled him over was the consummate poise and masterful manner of Doc himself. It was as if Caspar Milquetoast had elevated himself to a dictatorship, only he carried it off as if to the manner born. Elmer knew the answer to that, but he had not foreseen it. Doc had had a few whiffs of his own philter, and was in love with himself. He believed in himself, for the first time in his life, and it made a whale of a difference. He was bold, confident and serene.

Completely flabbergasted by the turn of events, Elmer turned and started to force his way up the aisle to where he had left Bettie, when a new roar broke through the reverberating hall. It was a new note, a superclimax if such a thing were possible. Elmer turned back and gripped the balcony rail, staring down.

Hannigan was on his feet, weeping like a brand snatched from the burning at an old-fashioned revival meeting. He was making a speech, if one could call such a sob-punctuated confession a speech, and it tore the lid right off the meeting. In the pandemonium of noise, Elmer could only catch a phrase here and there. "Clean government is what you want, and that is what you'll get . . . many times in the past I have . . . but now I bitterly regret it. My bank accounts are at the disposal of the State treasurer . . . will deed back the public lands I . . . glad of the opportunity to make restitution. I will give you a list, too, of the many unworthy appointments—"

Elmer slunk up the aisle; he could bear no more. It was all very confusing. He had counted on nothing like this. If Hannigan had turned saint, it was even a greater miracle than putting hair on the fumbling, shy little Doc's chest. Elmer shud-

dered at that last crack. Unworthy appointment, indeed! He must get hold of his uncle right away. He had quit worrying about whether the new governor would remember that he came to Cartersburg to get the raise for him; what concerned him now was whether he still had a job.

Eventually he found Bettie, exhausted and hysterically weeping. She was awfully happy about Tannent. Elmer grabbed her hand and dragged her from the place.

THAT was how Doc Tannent got to be governor.

No, Elmer didn't get the raise. He didn't need it. A week later Bettie quarreled violently with him. The day after that she pulled his hair, stamped on his foot, and scratched at his eyes. The day following she went after him with a knife and had carved several long gashes in him when the cops pulled her off and took her away.

Elmer, after they had finished bandaging him and put him to bed, told the attending physician the story of his conquest of Bettie. He could not understand her sudden revulsion to him. He even gave the doctor the list of ingredients in the love potion.

"That's bad," murmured the doctor, looking very profound. "Maybe it would be well if I took a blood specimen from her to see what's there."

A week later the doctor was back, and his expression was grave. He had with him a fourteen-page report from the biological bureau, and there was a lot in it about hormones and antibodies, toxins and antitoxins and other biological jargon.

"When she ingested that potion you gave her," said the doctor in his most severe manner, "she introduced in her system some strange and powerful organisms. Being a healthy girl, her body naturally resisted those foreign organisms. She built up antibodies to counteract them. It appears that she overdid. She is now immune to your influence."

"You mean," moaned Elmer, "she is going to *not* like me as much as she did like me?"

"Yes," said the doctor solemnly. "I am afraid that is the case. And it will be permanent. Fools, my boy, rush in where angels fear to tread."

Elmer closed his eyes and for a few minutes felt very faint. Then he suddenly thought of Doc Tannent, of whom he had said nothing to the hospital doctor. "Oh, gosh! Doc!" he wailed, and begged the nurse to let him put in a telephone call to the governor.

It was no good, though. The governor wouldn't receive the call. He was too big a man that week. It was not until the next week that the antibodies began to propagate inside the lads of the Hannigan gang. And then—oh, boy!

STILL AVAILABLE—

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THE BLACK FARM

by H. W. GUERNSEY

THE BLACK FARM

by H. W. GUERNSEY

All the rocks and posts and buildings were painted black. But that was because Mr. Zero was so hard to see—and so treacherous!

Illustrated by F. Kramer

SURROUNDING this field was a worn fence whose rails had been split and laid by Anton Bulik's grandfather. Mr. Zero remained where Anton had spotted him early of the humid morning, before milking—down there in the grassy corner of the field nearest the woods. This morning it had been no trouble at all; the whole area—all this low, rich, drained section—could be scanned from the woodshed of the ugly farmhouse. Anton had acquired the habit of smoking before breakfast. He owned five pipes. One corncob for tradition, two sweet briers which were most superior and expensive.

With the stem in his teeth Anton had opened the woodshed door guardedly, then incautiously stepped outside and smoked, speculating. At first there was no evidence of Mr. Zero, but then Anton's dark, worried eyes came back to that corner of the field. And he had looked, and wondered if the thing was asleep, if it ever slept. But, at any rate, he didn't have to go hunting for it as he had on previous occasions. Over the ridge and down to the lake, taking only a few steps at a time, slowly and watchfully.

He had brewed coffee and loaded his pipe again. As long as he knew where it was he wasn't worried, because Mr. Zero was slow-moving. Anton had eaten a cold Idaho potato that was in the refrigerator from last night. That was breakfast. When he mounted the tractor which was cuddled against the corn crib he had some peculiar equipment.

In a canvas knapsack hung thick slices of Virginia ham wrapped in waxed paper, sandwich slices of cabbage wrapped likewise, two apples from the orchard, a few slices from the loaf of bread. Nothing unusual about packing a lunch, but most irregular were the bulky, powerful binoculars and the rifle—a .30-30 lever-action holding seven shells, eight with the one in the chamber.

Anton's accuracy with this weapon was most uncommon, and quite well known to the natives of Hurley, a few miles away. A few of them had been sniped at, and hit, at impossible distances. That was quite a few months ago, following his wife's death and the finding of her bones. The muttering had died out when the natives, with few exceptions, reached the conclusion that Anton Bulik was mad in the most thoroughgoing and hard-working manner. His derangement manifested itself in various fascinating forms, but it had become evident that he was not homicidal until compelled to defend himself.

Since the death of his wife had driven him batty, it was horse sense

to argue that he hadn't murdered her, and he wasn't pulling a fast one that time he stood up Chris Christopherson in My Brother's Bar. Chris had been a fellow Martha went with at first.

True, Anton hadn't killed Martha because of Chris. And though he suspected, there was nothing he could prove at that time. There was no doubt about it now, that it was Mr. Zero; for the time being, Anton was keeping the information to himself. There was no thought of vengeance in his mind, for it was at once obvious that vengeance could not be inflicted on the thing that moved secretly, browsing with bovine placidity in satisfying its tremendous hunger. Anton talked to himself sometimes, consciously; he got to calling the monster Mr. Zero just as he addressed his collie as Smoke, the black stallion as Nigger. Mr. Zero had gotten Stripes, the cat, and her litter of five.

The thought of Martha's being encompassed in that thing's fatal embrace and unhurriedly eaten alive made his flesh crawl. He guessed he had nightmares more horrendous than any man ever had before. No, it wasn't to be regarded as animal at all. What he had to deal with every day was an unpredictable menace which fluctuated in form and perhaps in size. Its dimensions could not be found by rule. He didn't hate it nor was he afraid of it. It was an engrossing, difficult, highly dangerous problem, as clueless for solution as a cunningly manufactured puzzle delivered with the key piece missing. Possibly there was no way of lifting the strange hoodoo from the place, but he wouldn't wish it off on anybody else. One day his own bones would be found in a white, clean-picked litter in the field, if he got unwary.

Row by row he returned toward the farmhouse, having started at the far end of the field. All he could do was give Mr. Zero quick glances with increasing nervousness, having to thread the rows of green corn shoots, four at a time, through the pairs of cultivator shovels.

The situation was complicated further by the person watching him from a distance up the slope, twenty yards down from the woods. Up there was a log, the trunk of a good-sized oak hung around back of the tree's low stump so it wouldn't roll. Some time ago he had painted them black, as though he wanted to preserve them. Reclining behind the log and watching him was Irene Leigh, Martha's younger sister. It wasn't the first time, but this was the first time he had seen her.

From the adjoining Leigh farm Irene would take the old Indian Trail, the drag marks of the poles still discernible after all these years, and cut through the woods to one point of vantage or another, covering the place where Anton happened to be working. What her purpose was he couldn't properly guess, and he would have been wrong at any try. He had found evidences of her visits—a couple of apple cores with her even teeth marks the time she hid in the orchard, a piece of ribbon, a handkerchief, the prints of small feet, marks on the grass made by the weight of a light body.

Anton had met both girls at the State University, in the Agricultural College. He had liked Irene much the better of the sisters, but she was taking a lot of courses in the Arts College and wasn't marrying any farmer, as far as he could make out. At first he had been laughed at for his scientific farming, then there was Martha's disappearance and death, and now he was just holding his

own, if not, in fact, imperceptibly but surely going under. He couldn't work the whole blasted farm alone.

That conviction recurred to him as he came riding the slow roar of the tractor down the field to take the turn and the last four rows which would bring him back to the road near the crib and machinery sheds. "Betsy, you stinking pile of scrap iron," he muttered, referring to the formidable, efficient invention he was driving, "I don't know what I'd do."

Up there on the slope behind the black log, unaware of how conspicuous she was with the sunlight on her yellow hair, Irene watched intently. He had the advantage of her in knowing she was there. What he didn't know was the fact that around her middle was strapped a man's broad leather belt, against her stomach the tight belt held an old, long-barreled revolver. It was a .32-caliber Harrington & Richardson, and as soon as she decided something in her own mind she was going to use it on Anton Bulik.

SMOKE came to a rigid standstill, his legs apart, tail drooping, head low and thrust forward. Anton was thinking he would risk a glance up the slope at Irene as he made the turn; he grabbed, and braked the tractor to a halt just in time to avoid running down the dog. Smoke would have stood there, idiotically defending the tractor as well as Anton. He was a large dog and looked like a wolf, all wolf instead of being only partly so. His pelt was flowing iron-gray, unmarked except for accents at the ears and a stripe on the plume of tail. He was strictly obedient, fearless, and ferocious in his transcendental allegiance to one master.

Mr. Zero had remained where he was for much too long a time, and finally was on the move. Anton shut the motor off as he grabbed for the rifle. Low to the ground now, Smoke prowled a few slow paces forward in a direct and angry line toward the corner of the field where Mr. Zero had been satisfied to remain quiet all morning.

Anton still couldn't hear the dog's snarl, low and continuous and ominous, as though Smoke thought he was good enough to tear a pair of tigers to pieces. Anton himself couldn't see any movement, but the dog had detected it. Then some grass went flat; and there was no wind whatever. The dog quivered with impatience and sneaked a paw forward, breathed and uttered more of that advancing, determined growl.

Upon the steep slope, Irene was frightened by the crazy thing she was watching. When Anton had stood up on the tractor she jumped to her feet, and jerked the revolver from her belt when he picked up the rifle, she thought he was going to shoot at her, because there certainly was nothing in the corner of the field down there. There couldn't be. It was just a corner of a field, grassy, with nothing there. Unless it was something small, like a snake or a gopher. But the two of them, the dog and the man both, wouldn't look and act like that about any thing small, as if they were mad.

There was a blur, and she blinked a few times, rubbed because she thought she had gotten something in her eyes. And the rubbing made the blur worse, especially in that corner of the field. She was not as good a shot as Bulik, but she was accomplished and the bullet would have gone through the middle of his chest, and heart, if her finger had tightened a little more on the trig-

ger of the old, accurate revolver. The weight of it brought the gun down to her side as she watched incredulously.

It was preposterous—Anton standing up on the tractor down there, the beautiful dog creeping over the young corn, the two of them performing as though this were as important as hunting big game in Africa.

The dog yelped, and she had never heard a sound like it before. It was a sound of fury, sudden but musical, lunging with eagerness. Watching the dog above all else, even at this distance she saw Anton brush the magazine release of the rifle with his thumb. He was wagging the gun as though he didn't know what to aim at, but doing it watchfully.

Thinned by distance, his voice reached her, commenting in the imperturbable manner she knew: "All right, pal, you've got me." He was talking to the gorgeous dog. "Where the hell is it? Smoke!"

The dog's head came back for the briefest instant, the tongue acurl and dripping.

To Irene, Anton's voice sounded elfin and far away when he ordered, "Get him, Smoke."

Instantaneously, with its fur rippling like magic, the dog bolted in a diagonal for the corner. With all its abrupt speed and power and savagery it could have scared anything. Just as abruptly it turned at right angles, skidded on the ground and acted as though it had gone mad. It snapped at something invisible, snarled, barked just once, circled and kept on circling a patch of grass which the dog worried but never entered.

Anton hung a leg over the big wheel of the tractor and sat; he drew aim, let the barrel of the rifle drift a little to the left. He fired, moved the barrel up and fired again, and once more. The dog sniffed over the grassy corner, bristling; turned, and leaped the fence and resumed its tactics—snarling, snapping at something invisible, worrying the thin air, going through all the motions of driving a herd of tired, dumb cattle.

On the wheel of the tractor Anton sat watching his incomparable dog, the rifle aimed at the ground and his shoulders sagging. He wasn't worried about Smoke, because that dog was alert enough to terrify a ghost. Anton watched the grass, and the other manifestations, his eyes quick in tracing the progress of the thing; Mr. Zero followed the fence at the speed of a man's walk, turned and at the same rate of locomotion ascended the steep slope, a hundred yards to the left of the black log on the side hill. A tree on the crest of the hill shivered, the foliage making a soft, distant, wet sound in the quiet afternoon as it stirred, as though some blundering, immense creature had butted the trunk with elephantine power in passing. A juggernaut.

Way up there on the crest of the ridge, Smoke swept his tail back and forth a couple of times with sheer *joie de vivre*—with yanking abruptness, triumph. Zero was going down to the lake, where he would probably make a meal of frogs, turtles, fish, and the wet green grass. Perhaps a martin or two flying too low to the ground. This was a wet year, and there was an abundance of frogs and small coral-marked toads which Anton hadn't seen before. The dog turned and came down the hill laughing, all rippling gray, and back to Anton.

Irene was wearing a printed cotton dress which her rounded body

fitted snugly. The skirt was full, and she didn't have to catch it up to run. Her skin was golden-brown and she wore no stockings, and the broad leather belt made her waist look slim. She ran as though she were scared crazy; Anton watched the strained, rapid rhythm of her tanned legs until she disappeared into the woods, dodging along the Indian Trail. His lips quirked; it looked like a smile, but it wasn't one.

A glance down at the dog showed him that the dog was so satisfied with his conquest that he didn't need his ears held and gently tugged at, nor even the commending sound of Anton's voice. He was absolutely certain of how Anton felt about him, and they didn't advertise the regard in which they held each other. Bulik looked hard at the dog, which was facing the ugly farmhouse and panting from the session with Mr. Zero, and this time he grinned to the point of laughing aloud. The savage, conceited dog was an actor. Smoke drew his tongue in and sniffed scientifically at a large stone polished by the last rain and hail. Then he set off down the houseward boundary of the field at a beeline canter. It was like an order. Anton got back to the seat, started the motor, swung the tractor and headed down the last four rows of corn, feeding the rows of lusty green shoots between the shares, and jerking an upward look now and then at the leading, parading plume of Smoke's tail.

At the road he used the lever which raised the wicked, bright-steel shares, climbed the embankment. Smoke stood and looked back, panting. Anton followed the dog for the distance of a short walk along the dirt road, and again parked the tractor alongside the corn crib, below the house. According to the weather report over the radio, and it was reliable now, it wasn't going to rain tonight. For a change. And it was a difficult drive over rocky ground to the machinery sheds since the flood. He was still amazed that mere water could roll down that obstacle of boulders, big fellows, and shear away his pen of squealing pigs.

Anton took the sweat off his brow with his forearm and looked down at the barn. The black paint was holding pretty well. So was the paint on the silo. Brick. Painted black up to fourteen feet high.

All black. All around. He turned his head with impatience, and there was nothing to be seen but the things he had painted black, and he felt drunkenly unhappy. All the fences were painted black and so were the pens, machinery sheds, the granary, the farmhouse itself. The shade trees were black up to the bottom branches, and so were trees at strategic points in the woods, chiefly along the trails. Likewise boulders on the hillside, an outcropping shelf of granite, everything paintable on the Bulik farm was made startling with this calamitous color, "the badge of hell, the hue of dungeons and the suit of night." Everything to which he had taken the paint can was a pawn in the grim game he was playing with Mr. Zero. Bulik ascended the slope to the sprawling house and let Smoke in. After getting a glass of beer from the icebox, Bulik sat at the kitchen table. The stillness was complete and unfriendly, await with the unimaginable things that haunt an old, old building. If a man is alone there and thinking.

SATURDAY began by drizzling, and Bulik guessed it would continue all day. It wasn't rain. The air was

filled with a mist of pin-point beads of water which didn't seem to fall, but rather drift along the rolling ground in shapes. The stuff silvered the hair on his forearms and brushed an elusive taste on his lips. Overhead the clouds hung unusually low and moved so slowly that their direction was indeterminable.

With Smoke trotting ahead, they cut back through the orchard and went on in a line as direct as the terrain would allow. They went to the easternmost part of the farm, where it was bounded by the highway running north to the city. Here there was quite a stretch of pasture lying in a long slope. At the north end, a barbed-wire fence ran at right angles to the road along the edge of the woods, which got increasingly dense as a man entered them. Where the highway swung through the woods the embankment was steep, but it was fairly easy to enter through the pasture up there in the corner. Hunters from the city, after mushrooms or game, had beaten a path across that corner.

Anton hadn't minded in the least until young fellows started coming with girls, and snipping the barbed wire so they could get through without snagging their skirts or skins. Even that was all right, because he rarely had anyone to talk to. Nevertheless, he posted the place lavishly. The neat signs couldn't be missed: "No Trespassing." The variety was emphatic: "Absolutely No Hunting," "No Game, Mushrooms, Nor Flowers," and the simple "Keep Out" along with the lie, "Mad Bull."

The signs were only to prevent the hunters and trespassers from being hunted by Mr. Zero; but some sorehead was writing letters about getting the State to take title to the woods, which was one of the largest stands of virgin timber in the State, and turn it into a park. There was a pair of pliers in Anton's jeans. Someone had ignored the signs and cut the fence again, and he guessed that when he had the time he'd have to put up gates.

To the right and out of sight on the highway, two cars and then a third went by at blockhead speed after slowing up for the curve below. Trying to pass each other at seventy and eighty and more, as usual, even with the road slick from this mist. When he had followed Smoke only twenty yards in a diagonal across the pasture, he heard another car coming fast, and this one didn't slow up for the turn.

Anton could see it as vividly as though he were down there watching the frightening rapidity of it. The driver's speed took him far out, way out on the wrong side of the curve as he almost but not quite negotiated it. The wheels touched the shoulder of the road, and the shoulder was slippery from the weather. The machine skidded. Whoever was driving kept his head and didn't use his brakes. He stepped on the accelerator. Because of the motor principle involved, if it had been a left turn he would have made it by a hairbreadth. There was a slosh of gravel against the embankment as the car plowed long burrows along the shoulder. Then some ground broke away and the machine crashed into the ditch. Freakishly it bounced back onto the highway, but skidding sidewise with the tires squealing, and this time went back down with a slam and rending of metal. The ground shivered under Anton's feet as the car corkscrewed and bounced a couple of times.

The ditch was full of boulders, and Anton swallowed, thinking of the mess he was going to see.

But before he could move he was astounded to see the scrambling figure of a man pop into view and grab hold of the fence at the edge of the pasture, a quick-mannered, bantam-size individual in unpressed clothes. His hat was lost if he'd had any, and his forehead and cheek were torn open and bloody. Down the highway was the hum of another car, speeding; the fugitive glanced down, snarling, before he stepped on the wire close to a post and jumped awkwardly. The barbs of the top wire snagged his trousers leg and tripped him, and he bellyflopped into the pasture. It was lucky for him, because someone shot at him just then, and the shot missed. The gunman was in the approaching car, which screeched to a stop down below on the highway, behind the wreck of the first.

Anton watched dumfounded while the little man picked himself up and went pelting for the woods. Jackrabbit in style, he was making excellent time when he first noticed Bulik, and promptly snapped a shot with the revolver in his hand.

Anton threw himself to the ground and ordered the poised, whining dog, "Down, Smoke."

The little man was dodging eccentrically to make a bad target of himself; he was a generous fifty feet from the fence along the woods when the two pursuers clambered into sight from the highway. One of them exclaimed, "There he is!"

But before either of them could fire, their quarry was gone like a pricked balloon. They looked mighty silly there at the fence, wagging their guns as they searched for something to shoot at. Their man was fifty feet from the fence, at least, and couldn't have made it, disappeared like the sound of a finger's snap.

"There's a hole up there or something he dropped into," one man suggested.

"Must be," the other agreed. "Them weeds aren't tall enough to hide anything. Take it easy now, Art."

They rolled under the fence in turn and at a wary crouch headed for the spot where their man was last seen. Both of them jumped when Anton got to his feet and asked, "What's the trouble, gentlemen?"

"Where the hell did you come from?"

Anton answered literally, "That fellow fired at me, and I hit the ground."

"He was firing at us," one of them said, but they weren't really paying any attention to him. They were sneaking forward with their guns ready.

"All right, Smoke." Anton made a go-ahead gesture, and the dog barked and passed the detectives at a smooth trot.

"That's the idea," Art said approvingly. "Scare him out with the pooch."

But Smoke stopped at a safe distance from Mr. Zero and stood with legs planted; his tail didn't wag, and his jaws were shut. He looked at the woods, then back at the approaching men. By this time they could see that there was no hole, no depression in which the fugitive could fall or throw himself. The weeds weren't more than a foot high. There wasn't any hiding place between here and the woods.

"Well, what the hell," Art commented, and both paused momentarily with arms akimbo and stared around.

Smoke sidled against one of them and snapped his jaws, so that both were compelled to tour safely

around Zero. The dog acted none too friendly, and Anton was ordered, "Mind your dog, farmer, or I'll plug him between the eyes."

"If you did, you'd get it in the same place yourself," Anton said matter-of-factly. He shifted the position of the rifle on his arm.

He got a long, ugly stare from the man, and then they went up to the fence and looked into the woods.

The more talkative of the detectives, Art Garron, stated: "It's impossible. Only a bullet could travel that fast. Why, he was down there where that damned dog is, it seemed like."

Much similar in build to Garron, Floyd Sharpe said: "I never had my eyes off him, but he was dodging around, and there's this fog. He must 'a' been closer to the fence than he looked."

"I don't see any tracks. That ground in there is spongy. I—" He was going to say that he had done a lot of hunting in the big woods, in spite of the signs; he caught himself.

"He'd get lost if he went in there," Anton drawled. "Been lost in there a couple of times myself."

"You again," said Garron. "You watching him?"

"I was watching him."

"Well, did *you* see where he went?"

Peaceably Anton said, "It was as though you winked just as something you were after ducked behind a tree."

Both detectives were angry. "Listen, Art," said Sharpe. "There's no sense in us going in there, just the two of us. This is a hell of a big woods, goes back for miles. We'd be shooting at each other if we got separated and started circling around. He's in there all right; let's go down and give the wreck a look, and come back with some men."

Garron cursed with regret and added: "I thought we had him. How the hell could anybody get out of a smash-up like that alive?"

SMOKE was casting back and forth and moving slowly down the slope the distance of a pace at a time. Mr. Zero was on the move, retreating like an animal with freshly caught prey from the attentive, silently worrying dog.

Smoke went halfway down the pasture before coming back, and Sharpe inquired, "What's the dog after?"

"Playing with a gopher, possibly," said Anton.

"You don't talk much like a farmer to me," Garron said.

Anton shrugged. "Farmers go to school."

"That dog can smell tracks, can't he?"

"He's not going into the woods and get shot at for you, or by you, or anyone else," Anton said flatly.

"Going to be wet as hell in there, Art," said Sharpe.

"Yeah, I never forget a guy who does me a favor," said Garron, with another of his baleful stares.

Abruptly Garron pointed his gun at the dog, and Smoke crouched with a snarl. Anton didn't bring the rifle up; just aimed at Garron from the hip.

Garron relaxed, chuckling, and holstered his gun. "Just kidding," he said. "Just kidding."

"That ain't no dog," Sharpe said suspiciously. "That's a wolf."

"I don't care what he is," Garron retorted. "I don't want to see him around when we come back. I don't like him."

"He doesn't like you either, and neither do I," Anton commented.

"Come on, Art," Sharpe urged. "We're getting nowhere, unless this guy's got a phone."

"You're closer to town than my phone."

If the fugitive was in the woods, there wasn't too much hurry, those woods being what they were with a serpentining swamp and a multitude of sink holes and brush like barbed-wire entanglements. Garron lingered to indulge in a moment of gnawing frustration, taking it out on Bulik.

"You missed a golden opportunity, rube," he said, and his face was congested with his feelings. "You know who that was? That was Tommy Mishaw. All you had to do was plug him, and you let him get away. They want him in three States, and there's about five thousand dollars reward for him, and we'd 'a' given you a nice split on it. Think of that. Five housand!"

"I don't see why I should have shot at him."

"He shot at you, didn't he?"

"You said he was shooting at you."

"What's the difference? He come busting through here, didn't he? And with all them signs you had a perfect right to shoot at anybody."

"In that case I have a perfect right to open fire on you right now."

Garron had his mouth open to say something more. The best he could do was a strangled sound of disgust, and he started back to the highway with Sharpe. First they had to circle the dog, which turned in its tracks to point at them, a soft growl issuing between the bared teeth.

Anton heard something that sounded like "Crazy farmer," and observed to himself, "What a couple of low customers!" and started down the hill to locate Mr. Zero. His face was hot, but he couldn't help it if he had taken such an instantaneous dislike to those men. Before he had gone very far he heard the sound of a car being started and shifted rapidly. Sharpe and Garron going for help, or perhaps one of them had remained to investigate the wreck down below. The men weren't from Hurley, but from Waterloo, the larger town off to the east.

In the newspapers Bulik had seen the name of the shrimpy man they had been chasing. If ever the law shagged a man bowlegged it was Tommy Mishaw, more often called Sleepy and Shut-eye. He robbed banks and committed various similar crimes of violence which are regarded as gainful in the underworld.

He got his first name by starting out with a Tommy, or submachine gun, as a weapon, and earned some money that way until the apparatus jammed one time and he had to junk it. He had the artillery rigged inside a suitcase, the front and back ends of the luggage being hinged and connected to swing open simultaneously when he stuck his fist in the rear, and with this thing he walked into country banks and up to tellers' cages. He took to sidearms, but on the whole his style didn't change and he was no hand at disguising himself, no matter how hard he experimented with hirsute adornment and haberdashery. The hunt for him got kind of cruel, like a householder planting poisoned mice along the back fence to take care of the cats that keep him awake at night.

The law came upon and all but caught Mishaw a dozen times, and thus he acquired his other nicknames. In hotels or barns, and once in a tavern booth with his chin in

A couple of days later Anton found what Mr. Zero had left of Mishaw—

his beer, he was always asleep, grabbing his forty winks when he decided the opportunity was at hand. He had never failed to shoot his way out, and there were a couple of dead men besides the three accredited to him in the actual holdups. Once Mishaw got going in one of those shooting matters, he could really scamper.

What with the wrangling among the banks, the law and the insur-

ance companies, Mishaw was very much sought after for a little fellow like him. The only reason he hadn't socked a bullet through Anton there in the pasture was because, besides being hurt and in a hurry after he wrecked his car, Anton loomed and was just one of those things that get fired at wildly in a fog and turn out to be unsubstantial. Either that, or Mishaw had killed another man, the way Bulik had flopped to the ground. Ordinarily, Mishaw could peg a bullet through a target with the accuracy of a carpenter driving nails on his own time.

ANTON HOPPED in order to avoid kicking something on the grass. It was a pistol, and it had been dragged, because a tuft of green grass was sticking up through the trigger guard. Down on hands and knees, Anton sniffed, and the dog sniffed at his hair. The gun was warm with a reek that Anton considered pleasant. Mishaw's gun; dropped from nerveless fingers, proving that Mr. Zero had him. Anton got up, butting Smoke's nose with a jerk of his head. He plucked the dog's ear, fingering it at the roots, and they continued down the slope of the pasture through the fog until Smoke turned across Anton's way and leaned hard to stop him.

How the dog knew where Zero was baffled him. The dog's senses were sharper than his, of course; but, extra sense or not, Smoke merely seemed to know where danger was. Anton got the rifle ready, seeing nothing. He looked down at the silken-silver weight of the dog against his legs and backed up.

There was a little hollow here, and Mr. Zero was in it and wasn't moving. Anton walked well around, backed up and sat on a rock. Smoke sat on his haunches alongside, alternately opening his jaws to pant and then closing them alertly.

With the rainy fog there was nothing to be seen; Anton could make out nothing at all, but he knew Mr. Zero was there. He couldn't do anything but peer because he had nothing to go by. He didn't touch the dog now, nor speak to him, because it would be Smoke who would scent danger first. Anton used his shoulders as though in revulsion, and very slowly got out tobacco and filled his pipe.

There wasn't a sound unless it was that of the grass growing, but he turned his head as though he had been called. He puffed on the pipe a couple of times, and then he located her. The girl down there. In the corner of the field diagonally opposite the cut wires was a cattle gate, and perched on the top wooden bar was Irene Leigh. It was funny how a person could remain still in this drizzle and fog and not be observed. He held the warm bowl of the pipe in his hand, and she stared back at him steadily. She was wearing a costume that reminded him of the tennis courts up at the university: silken gabardine shorts as white as the cloth could be bleached; a pull-over sweater, also white; and over that an expensive light-gray leather jacket in suède. Around her waist was a broad leather belt which looked like one her brother used to wear, and tucked in the belt was a revolver.

Anton told himself that he would be snag-dabbed, and got up off his rock. Leaving Smoke to look after Mr. Zero, he went down there, not very fast, and not shambling, either.

"Hello, Irene," he said, and looked back swiftly to make sure that Smoke was minding. The dog wasn't bothering, so Zero kept to

the comfortable hollow, a nothingness in the nothingness of fog.

"Hello, Anton," she responded; her voice was musically throaty and assured. The way she lingered over words was seductive; he distrusted her, because he was unable to tell whether she was sincere or whether she was just holding her laughter in. Her eyes were always so wide that it might have been either, and he couldn't forget the laughter he had left behind, long ago, after he had asked her to marry him, and he had started running through the dark because her laughter followed him.

His gaze fixed glumly on the butt of the revolver. He asked, "For me, maybe?"

"Uh-huh," she admitted casually. "It's perfectly silly saying it. I—had to do something about it if you killed Martha, or if I thought you were—"

"Insane?"

"Uh-huh." Casual again, inspecting him with her indecipherable eyes.

"Do you think I'm a lunatic?"

"No, you're not crazy," she said thoughtfully, with their eyes searching each other's eyes. "Anton, what's it all about? I got here just as that man came running through the pasture and shot at you. I just nearly pulled the trigger when he was gone." She snapped her fingers. "Like that."

"Mr. Zero got him," Anton said succinctly.

After a pause she asked gravely, "Who's Mr. Zero?"

"I'll show you." He nodded at Smoke and turned away.

THEY ASCENDED the slope to the point where Smoke was standing guard. Anton directed, "Come around here."

He maneuvered her a little to the side and behind Smoke, and indicated one in the line of fence posts, all of them painted black.

"I don't see anything," she said, after staring and searching all the ground between.

"Keep looking," said Anton. "It's hard to get the knack of it in this mist. Blurs everything."

"Oh!" she exclaimed in a moment. The post was bigger than the others, and curiously blurred and vague in silhouette, like a streak of lampblack painted against the mist.

"Come down here now." They descended a little way and sighted through that area guarded by the dog at another post. It jumped in size, and its solidity, like the other, took on the insubstantiality of something like a plume of dirty vapor.

"That's Mr. Zero," Anton stated. "He got Martha, and he's got that little fellow right now." He told her who Mishaw was.

Irene gasped and laid her fingers on his forearm. She was trembling and stammered: "I don't know what to say."

"There isn't anything to say. There he is, that's all."

"But what is it?" she demanded, shocked.

Anton shrugged. With a single sardonic syllable of laughter he remarked: "All I know is that the blasted thing won't get off my farm. Good foraging here so far. It came from somewhere up north."

"How do you know that?"

"I'm not the only one who's lost cattle. I got to wondering what was killing them off, and made a trip up to the agricultural college. Asked them for reports on farm animals killed, and game. This hoodoo has left a track of skeletons running straight north on up into Canada. Don't know how far up."

She breathed the words, "It's fan-

tastic," but what she meant was, "It's horrible."

Irene asked: "Isn't there something to do about it?"

"What?" he demanded, with restrained rage. "I've painted the whole damned place black to spot it easier, so it won't get me. You can't kill it; bullets don't hurt it much more than mosquito bites."

He gave her all the information he had been able to wring out of the mystery. What material it was made of he didn't know; it had tremendous weight, and the solidity of flesh made invisible. Its means of locomotion couldn't be discovered, but its progress might be described as the sluggish roll of a huge, resilient ball of dough. It couldn't move very fast, or hadn't found the occasion to so far. Certainly its progress down from the north was a loitering one—browsing speed.

It could bear extreme cold, for during the winter the temperature had gone as low as forty-two degrees below zero.

How long it could go without food was indeterminate, but while it was Anton's guest it ate enormously. Into its maw went a whole cow at a whack. It had no ferocity itself; it was an ambush with the lumbering temperament of a tame bear. To all intents and purposes invisible in itself, it possessed the extraordinary talent of rendering invisible whatever entered it. That was the only way of describing the way Mr. Zero fed. An animal would enter the area occupied by the unknown creature and would not reappear except as a débris of bones.

In size, Anton guessed it was from twelve to fourteen feet in height and perhaps as much in diameter. A big, sinister blob. The first he saw of it, he related, was the blur which he thought was a fault in his vision; but the blur remained where it was in the landscape, while he thought, while gooseflesh covered him, while he made certain of the thing's existence with growing disbelief and dismay. But he still thought that he had discovered Mr. Zero's fatal handicap—that, while he was practically invisible to the human eye—if not, possibly, to the dog's—the very nature of the material composing him effected a certain amount of magnification of objects behind him.

There were a few other things, one particular characteristic of Mr. Zero's which was most fiendish and subtle, but before Anton could speak of it there was a groan as though a man had made a furious effort and failed.

SMOKE pricked up his ears and uttered a prompting bark. Anton, and Irene breathing hard, watched the area from which the groan originated. There was another cry from that mysterious prison which had swallowed up Mishaw, this time almost a squeal as the gangster threw every ounce of clawing, frantic strength into the try.

Anton put his arm against Irene and cautioned: "Don't go any closer. This is as close as we can go."

He called, "Mishaw!"

After a moment Mishaw's voice responded, hollow and bodiless as an echo: "All right, hayseed, how does it work? Let me out of here!"

"I can't get you out of there," Anton answered. "Quick! What's the trouble? Can you stand up?"

"You can see, can't you?" Mishaw snarled. "What kind of a gag is this?"

"We can't see you."

"What?" Mishaw yelled, outraged, and he wailed, "What kind

of junk is this I'm stuck in, anyhow?"

"What do you mean?" Anton asked anxiously. "What sort of stuff is it? Mishaw!" He waited and called again, "*Mishaw!*"

Mishaw made a strangling sound and moaned, "God!"

It was brief and devastating.

From the oblivion of Mr. Zero came an unbelievable, siren-high, bloodcurdling screech. Mishaw screamed: "My hand is gone! I can see the bones of my hand! Help!" It was the yelp of a mad animal. They could hear him batting around in there, and from the rattle of bones more than his hand was gone. He screamed continuously, shouting incoherencies of maniacal, babbling horror. He *was* insane now, but still hideously alive. The gibbering diminished into a slobbering, watery gurgle, into silence.

"Mishaw!" Anton called.

Irene couldn't stand it, and Anton caught her as she slumped in a faint. Unsteadily, shaken, he swung her up with an arm under her knees and walked down the pasture, and she didn't open her eyes until they were on the route back to the farmhouse. He started to set her down, but she clasped her arms around his neck and held so tightly that it hurt, shuddering. Her breathing made a sound as though she were crying.

Sharpe and Garron returned with a dozen others, and five days were spent in systematically searching the big woods. Naturally no trace of Mishaw was found; Anton figured out that the only reason Mr. Zero didn't help himself to a couple of the posse was that he didn't like too much activity in his neighborhood. It had been demonstrated that he didn't like Smoke's attentions, and on the way down from the north he had invariably avoided cities and towns and kept to the open country. The hermit nightmare. Then Mishaw was falsely reported to have been seen up in the city, and the hunt moved elsewhere.

Anton found Mishaw's bones on the following Saturday, on the shore of the lake below the sand cliff where the martins nested. The skeleton was disarticulated, as usual. Along with sopping wads of clothing, he found a thin platinum watch which had stopped but started going again with an inaudible tick when he wound it. Farther on was a shiny long wallet which contained a thousand and some dollars. Anton reflected that he would turn over Mishaw's worldly goods to the Hurley authorities when he got around to it—say, after the next election on the chance that an honest police chief got in.

It was a hot day, and along the beach the air was stagnant and stifling. He threw a stick out into the enamel-smooth water for Smoke to retrieve, and the dog abandoned it on shore, knowing perfectly well that there would be another stick farther on. When the dog shook himself off, the spray felt good on Anton's skin, and he decided to have a short swim for himself in the inlet.

Ahead, around a little hook of land, was a sand-bottom pool, into which fed the cool water of his brook, surrounded, except for the channel into the lake proper, by woods. He left the beach and cut directly up and over the thumb of peninsula, and then he proceeded cautiously, because he heard splashing that wasn't the sound of water gurgling over stones.

Out in the pool, swimming lazily in the sunlight, Irene was so lovely

to watch that Anton stole down to cover where he could see her without being discovered. She must have been here a lot, because she was toasted an even golden tan. Smoothly she went under water; after a couple of strokes she rose and broke the surface, but held her lungs inflated to float on her back. Her momentum carried her slowly toward shore. She kicked a couple of times, then stood, sprang as high out of the water as she could with delight. Paddling at the water with her hands, she unhurriedly ascended the sandy slope of the bottom toward the beach where her robe was folded.

When she had come out until the water was thigh-deep, she halted and turned her head as though with suspicion. Anton made no attempt to hide.

But she didn't see him. She took another step beachward, and from then on acted as though she were hypnotized, sleepwalking. One languid step after another, the water breaking at her knees and then below the knees.

ANTON JERKED his attention to the beach, and for an instant was paralyzed with horror. A little distance beyond her robe was a boulder that had been rose granite but which he had painted black. The rock was bigger than it should have been, and its contours were as hazy as an object seen through tears; because Mr. Zero was parked there, reaching for the girl with his invisible webs—the scent or numbing emanation of power or whatever it was, the means by which it was aided in catching prey.

Early in the game, Anton had narrowly missed being sucked into that trap and then only by a violent effort of will. What made Smoke so valuable was that the potent, beckoning influence only enraged the dog. Smoke recognized it as something that required full obedience, and he obeyed nothing living, no one, not even the pull of hunger, excepting Anton Bulik alone.

Anton's command was a low, terrified groan. "Smoke!"

The dog got going as though it had been catapulted. Jaws laughing wide, it went down in a flowing silver streak, a magic of silent savagery. Smartly it took the headlong flight straight down to the beach, and then cut right and skimmed over the sand.

Anton had jumped to his feet, and shouted frantically without realiz-

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ing it, before plunging down through the brush after the dog like a madman. Irene didn't hear him. She was walking slowly ashore, smiling raptly, and set foot on the sand, packed hard by the water. It was so close that Anton's wits were numbed with fear; nothing that happened registered, and what he did was purely automatic, only vaguely remembered afterward.

The dog left the sand in a spectacular leap and struck the girl amidships, knocking her back into the water with a resounding splash. Smoke somersaulted over her into the pool, churned, and came out again in an explosion of water.

Anton came pounding down the beach, avoided the hysterically angry dog and plunged into the pool. Grabbing up Irene, he floundered out until he was waist-deep with her and watched. Inch by inch, Smoke's murderous rage forced Mr. Zero up the beach. Nothing else could happen. The dog was too quick to be caught and was absolutely without fear, whether Mr. Zero was just a cowardly hulk or not. The retreat accelerated until Zero was going away at the speed of a man's walk, entering the woods and laboring over the point down to the shore of the lake whence Anton had just come.

He carried Irene ashore, left her for a while and came back, to find her sitting on the black boulder, dazed. She couldn't remember anything that happened, and he had to tell her.

That scent of Zero's could be detected at a distance of twenty or thirty feet. It wasn't an animal odor, perhaps not an odor at all, but it was damned effective. It was an inexplicable condition of the air, and was as satisfying as a cool drink to a man going mad with thirst on the desert. Its very elusiveness was hypnotizing, with the elusive suggestion of perfume worn by someone beautiful, of great tranquillity or the satisfying weariness preceding sleep without pain, a tormenting glimpse of the Elysian Fields. Within his area of operations Mr. Zero exercised the fascination of something which had to be explored once that ineffable glow ascended into the victim's brain.

"It was something like that," Irene murmured.

THEY were sitting on the woodshed steps of the farmhouse in the late afternoon, and Anton suggested that he might walk over to the Leigh farmhouse with her.

He thought she hadn't heard him, but she announced, as though no contradiction were possible, "I'm going to stay here."

Gently he rubbed the back of his head, and she reminded him: "You asked me to marry you one time. Remember that night? I laughed, and you got up and went away and didn't come back. I was laughing because I had you. When you didn't understand, there was nothing for me to do but keep on laughing."

"Well," said Anton.

"We can go into town and take care of the license and things."

Anton could hardly breathe, but managed to say, "I guess so." He pondered on an excuse to get inside and make his bed, because he didn't want her to see it that way, because he really wasn't sloppy. And then they were discussing Mr. Zero.

Irene startled him by saying: "We ought to celebrate, maybe, but that makes me think—why don't you feed him?"

"Feed whom?"

"Mr. Zero. As far as I can make out from what you've said, he's just an enormous stomach. Never satisfied. He's never refused anything that can be digested. Like a permanent Thanksgiving dinner."

"Hm-m-m. Suppose I drive a couple of cows into his neighborhood," Anton suggested ironically, and chewed on a straw.

"Suppose you do. He'll get them sooner or later."

"Nope. I'm keeping them in the barn. Zero will go up to a building, but he won't go inside, or else he doesn't know there is an inside."

"When he gets hungry he might find out."

Anton took the straw out of his mouth and sat with his elbows on his knees for a long time, motionless with thought. He turned his head and looked down to where Mr. Zero was, beyond the corn crib.

Suddenly he got up and stretched and laughed. He snapped his fingers at Smoke, and Irene got up and followed along. At first Anton thought of having Smoke do the job, but decided on something more direct. He took a chicken from a coop and killed it, Irene watching. Going down within range of Zero, Anton let some blood splatter and dragged the flopping hen on the ground the short distance down the road to the granary. There he left the headless bird to accept its destiny and entered the two-story black building. With the door open, he stood with Irene on the platform until Zero followed the trail of blood and scent and took the flapping chicken into his private nothingness. The hen simply vanished off the ground.

Anton picked up a hundred-pound sack of grain and tossed it off the platform. It disappeared before it reached the dusty ground. In midair it was gone.

Promptly he seized another bulging sack and tossed it, and the same thing happened as to the first. And again, and again. Grimly he continued until his shirt was plastered to his skin with sweat. Outside, Smoke sat on his haunches, head cocked aside and watching with interest.

At last Anton leaned against the door jamb and said: "My God, what's the use? How much can the beast hold?"

But Smoke got up, sniffing, because slowly Mr. Zero was moving away from the granary. Very slowly, ponderously. The dog wagged his tail with contempt and jumped up in the granary to stick his nose in Anton's hand.

"Can you see him, Smoke?" Anton asked.

In the darkness they trudged back up to the farmhouse.

There was no sign of Mr. Zero the next day, nor the next. But on the third afternoon Smoke came back from a ramble, and his actions, whining and running off, and whining while he waited, persuaded Anton to follow him.

What was left of Mr. Zero was deep in the big woods. There was an irregular clearing here, and in it, on the ground, was something which would have been inexplicable to anyone except Anton and Irene. There was a broad circle about forty-five or fifty feet in circumference, of some crisp, black stuff that crunched to powder underfoot like eggshell—like the rim of a huge mushroom that had dried to powder in the sun.

In the middle of this ring was a huge pile of wet yellow grain which gleamed like billions and billions of wheat-size grains of solid gold.

THE LIVING GHOST

by E. A. GROSSER

The two old people were haunted by the ghost of a granddaughter. Unusual sort of ghost, though—the granddaughter could be seen by others as a still-living person—

Illustrated by Orban

PAUL DUGAN parked his car in the driveway and went up the steps to the front door of the old-fashioned two-story farmhouse. There was no bell, not even one of those brass knockers so beloved by the uninitiated—they are quite hard on the fingers unless grasped correctly. So Dugan used his knuckles.

He thought he heard someone move within the house, but no one answered his summons. He knocked again. There was a circular glass panel in the door at shoulder height,

shrouded with a gauzy wisp of curtain. He felt someone looking at him.

He looked at the glass, and ceased knocking. A girl was watching him. The gauzy curtain softened her features but didn't conceal the detached, uncertain expression of her face. It was the expression of one who has been cut off from human companionship, one who has lived and thought alone.

Their eyes met, and hers lighted with an echo of his smile. The door opened and she stood in the doorway. She was pretty, Dugan thought—really pretty. Her eyes were large and dark, almost luminous. Her features were even, though pale, and her lips were the more deeply red by contrast.

"Does Charles Crane live here?"

It seemed to him that there was a suppressed eagerness in the girl's bearing—that she was glad to see him. The thought, coupled with her beauty, gave him a warm, pleased feeling.

"Yes," she replied in a low voice that was like music to Dugan.

He waited for her to invite him inside and offer to fetch old man Crane. She must be the granddaughter. But she said nothing.

"I'm Paul Dugan—from Frobisher & Martel, attorneys at law," he introduced himself. "You must be Marcia Crane."

"I am—I am," she said quickly.

It was almost as though she were trying to reassure herself, and for a moment Dugan glimpsed a haunting fear in her eyes.

"Will you tell Mr. Crane I am here?"

"I . . . I can't," she replied hesitantly, the fear that shadowed her eyes becoming more apparent. "But I think he is around back—in the garden."

Dugan felt the rebuff and turned away to go down the stairs.

"Thank you. I'll probably be able to find him."

"You are angry!" the girl cried. "Oh, please don't be."

Surprised, Dugan halted and looked back at her. But she must have realized that she had said the wrong thing, for she quickly closed the door.

But Dugan was almost certain that she was standing a few feet back from the curtained glass panel and watching him as he went down the steps and started down the path that led around the side of the house. Neatly planned and raked garden beds lay rich and dark on both sides of the path, and in some of them he saw the green sprouting of tulips, narcissuses or some other bulb flowers. He rather wished that his visit had been timed to their blooming.

But he was beginning to understand Schwabacher's refusal to come to this place a second time. There was something queer about the house, or rather, the people in it. Schwabacher had been unwilling to talk, except to say positively that the old folks were as crazy as loons. And Schwabacher was a phlegmatic, unimaginative fellow.

Dugan, with conservatism quite fitting to his legal training, refused to pass judgment on the elder Cranes. He hadn't met them yet. But he had met the girl, and she was —queer. He hesitated over the word, then concluded that no girl as pretty as she should be considered mad. But queer was right.

As Dugan rounded the house a nondescript shepherd dog regarded him suspiciously and growled. Dugan halted immediately.

A white-haired woman, busy pull-

ing vegetables from the kitchen garden, ceased working and straightened with a hand pressed to her back.

"Here, Billy," she called the dog and he went to her obediently, though he still watched Dugan carefully.

The woman stared at Dugan, obviously waiting for him to speak.

Dugan was sure that here was another he could tally on the queer side. "Are you Mary Crane?" he asked.

When she nodded, he continued, "I'm Paul Dugan of the law firm of Frobisher & Martel, executors of the estate of your son, Charles Crane, Jr. It is necessary again to have some papers signed by you and Mr. Crane, and your granddaughter, Marcia Crane."

The woman wiped her hands with her apron. "Pleased to meet you," she said vaguely. "Charley's gone to town, but he'll be back 'fore long and we'll be glad to sign. But Marshy—can't. She's gone."

"Gone? Where?"

"Dead, I guess," the old woman announced bleakly. "Leastways her —" She halted, and bent over the garden again. "Charley'll be here in a few minutes," she said, pulling a carrot from the soft loam and putting it into the wicker basket.

"But if Marcia Crane's gone, who was it that told me to come around back?" Dugan asked. "She said her name was Marcia Crane."

The woman's head jerked up and there was fear in her eyes as she searched Dugan's face. The dog growled.

"Told you to—" she repeated. "You *saw* her?"

"Yes," Dugan said, watching the old woman. The fear in the seamed old face was different than that he had seen in the girl's, but it was fear. The old woman stared at him. The dog whined and thrust its muzzle under the woman's hand, licked her fingers with a damp, pink tongue.

"Don't say anything about it, Mr. Dugan," she pleaded. "Don't tell Charley. He can't stand any more. Please!"

"All right," Dugan soothed. "If you say so, I won't say anything."

The woman's leathery face lighted with a smile of gratitude. "Oh, thank you! You can't imagine how hard it is, her sleeping in her own bed, and reading books and papers, and eating at the table—just like she was alive. Course we never see her, but that just makes it all the worse because we never know when she's around."

Dugan heard the rattling, banging of an old automobile at the front of the house. There was a loud crash.

"That's Charley now," the woman said. "Remember, don't say anything about seeing Marcia. You promised."

DUGAN NODDED, wondering if Crane always made as much noise when he returned from town. Then he remembered that he had left his own car in the driveway. He started around the house at a run.

His worst fears were realized when he arrived at the front of the house. An elderly man was standing at the side of the driveway, regarding Dugan's car and an old Model T that had butted into it.

"That your car, son?" the elderly man asked.

Dugan growled affirmatively, taking stock of the damage: two twisted rear fenders, a punctured gas tank, and two flats obviously beyond redemption. And only one spare tire!

"I'm sorry," the old man apolo-

gized. "That danged old critter shimmies like a hula dancer every time I turn in the driveway." He was down on his hands and knees investigating the damage to the relic.

"Can you take me to the village, Mr. Crane, so I can send a repair car out?"

"Not in *Lizzie*, I can't," the old man announced from under the car. "Steering knuckle broke."

"How far is it?" Dugan asked, holding his breath.

" 'Bout ten miles. You can't make it 'fore dark."

"We'd be glad to have you stay here the night," said the old woman, who had followed Dugan. "Then you can be fresh for the walk in the morning."

The old man hesitated, then added his voice to hers, "Yeah, better stay with us till morning."

Dugan looked at the old pair, and the old house, and was reluctant. He would have liked to have the papers signed immediately, and be on his way back to town. But—

"Thanks a lot," he said. "I don't like to impose, but it looks like I might have to."

"Nonsense!" said Mrs. Crane, turning away. "No trouble at all!"

"Well, come on, son," said the old man, following her. "I guess they won't bump again."

The elderly pair drew a little ahead of Dugan, purposefully, he thought. On the stairs, the man turned to his wife and spoke quickly in a low voice, touching his coat pocket at the same time.

"I got 'em, Mary," Dugan overheard him say, "three of 'em anyway. One of 'em's sure to banish her like the book says, and maybe we can have some peace."

Dugan didn't hear the woman's reply, but she seemed to be warning him to silence. Dugan followed them indoors, feeling even more uncomfortable than before. The old man led him into a front room that had the stale, dustless atmosphere of an old-fashioned parlor. Mr. Crane invited him to be seated, then proceeded to set and light a fire in the grate.

There was a book lying open on the table beside Dugan's chair, and he picked it up idly for want of something better to do as the old man went to the kitchen to speak with his wife. He closed the book on his finger to keep the place and looked at the spine to see the title. It was an old volume and the gilt lettering was nearly worn away. He turned to the title page and read: "Ghosts, Ghouls, and Vampires—How to Circumvent Their Evil Desires, and Encompass Their Destruction." He smiled faintly. The author's name was not printed.

He opened the book again to the place where it had been left open, intending to read. But the old volume was snatched from his hands, and he looked up to meet the angry eyes of Mr. Crane.

Without a word the old man stalked out of the room with the book under his arm, while Dugan stared after him. He sat in the chair without investigating anything else, hoping thereby to refrain from sticking his neck out again. He wondered where the girl had gone. With an eerie crinkling of the skin on the back of his neck, he wondered if there was such a girl—if he had really seen and spoken to her, or whether it had only been an illusion. But there was one thing he no longer wondered about, and that was: Why Schwabacher had refused to come to the Crane household. He wished that he hadn't come himself.

MRS. CRANE came to the door and invited him to come to dinner. Mr. Crane was already in the dining room and was just finishing adjusting the lamp to his complete satisfaction. He set it in the center of the table.

He looked up when Dugan entered, and smiled as though nothing had happened—as though he hadn't smashed Dugan's automobile, or snatched a book away from him without a word of explanation.

"Mary says your name's Dugan?" he said.

Dugan agreed that it was, and looked again at the table. There were places set for four people.

"Mary always sets a place for poor Marcia," Mr. Crane offered in explanation, then became silently uncommunicative.

"Where is the nearest phone?" Dugan asked as they sat down at the table.

" 'Bout nine miles," Mr. Crane answered.

Dugan relapsed into silence. He had expected some such answer as that. He considered his situation, and found it extremely unpleasant. There was not even the lightening factor of the pretty Marcia, whom it was, he was now sure, he had seen when he first came. And the idea that he had first seen and spoken to a ghost was in itself disquieting.

The old pair was nervous, extremely so, he thought. At every creak of the ancient house, they started with what he was sure was fear. There was a creaking, louder than those before, which was regularly followed by others, and seemingly closer each time as though someone were descending a flight of squeaking stairs. The Cranes looked up, met each other's eyes, and Dugan watched the blood leave their faces.

Marcia Crane entered, and Dugan's chair scraped on the floor as he rose to his feet. The eyes of the older pair were transferred to him.

"You . . . you *see* it?" the old man demanded, cheeks gray with fright.

Dugan glanced at him, puzzled, then took pains to see that his hand brushed against Marcia Crane's shoulder as he helped her to be seated. There was nothing ghostly about her. Her flesh was warm and thrilling to his touch. She smiled her thanks for his assistance as he sat down again.

Mr. and Mrs. Crane left the table almost immediately. Dugan followed them with his eyes as they went to the parlor, and he heard the lisping of whispering voices. He looked again at his lovely dinner companion. She, too, was staring after them, and her eyes showed hurt and that same haunting fear that Dugan had seen before.

He started to ask her why they acted as they did, but he saw that her eyes were filling with tears as she looked down at her plate, and thought it would be kinder to be silent.

She was the first to speak when she asked a few minutes later with a faint accent of panic: "Why don't you speak to me?"

"Why . . . uh . . . I thought it would be better to be still," he said confusedly. "You seemed hurt because they left us."

"But I want you to talk to me! I've had nobody to talk to me for months, and it's terrible—silence, all the time. And every time I do anything, they stare and turn pale with fright. Oh, please tell me! You do see me, don't you? I'm not a ghost, am I?"

"You are a very pretty young woman, as far as I can see," he as-

sured her, and wished that he had never heard the name, Crane.

She colored slightly with pleasure, and her eyes glistened with unshed tears of happiness. "Oh, it's so good to hear you say that," she exclaimed, then was embarrassed at her show of appreciation.

Dugan felt a little easier. Well, he knew how to handle one of them now—flattery. If he could only find a way through the old pair's madness, he could spend a comparatively comfortable night. But he fully intended to start for the village at sunrise.

DUGAN STARTED with surprise at a sound from the doorway, and turned to see the old man standing with a glass of water in his hand. By God, he would have to get a grip on himself or he would be as bad as they were, by morning. He felt shaky inside and the nerves on the undersides of his arms felt as though they were vibrating like violin strings. With an effort he quieted his nerves and lifted the cup of coffee to his lips and sipped it.

Over the rim he saw that Marcia Crane was watching him. Suddenly it seemed to him that he was the focus of all eyes. She smiled at him, showing even white teeth.

He smiled at himself. Even his nervousness at his unpleasant situation couldn't prevent his noticing her beauty. It must be love, he thought. It was a pity she was mad. But flattery was her Achilles' heel, so—

He lifted his cup slightly, as though toasting her, and took another sip of the steaming fluid. She smiled her appreciation, and he had to fight down the attraction he felt toward her.

She lifted a morsel of food to her mouth. Dugan felt a little better. Now, if that old fool would get out of the doorway and stand where he could see him without turning, things would be a lot more comfortable.

"It's so good to be foolish, isn't it?" the girl asked with a laugh.

Foolish!

"Yes, it certainly is," he agreed, and made a mental note to be a trifle more subtle in the future. The girl wasn't as crazy as he had thought.

From the corner of his eye he watched her lift her own cup to drink, then he heard the old man step forward. He ducked as the old man's arm swung forward, then saw that the blow was not meant for him. But Marcia Crane received the contents of a full glass of water squarely in the face.

She dropped her cup with a gasp, as the old man leaped backward as though expecting an explosion. Dugan rather expected one, too. But she cleared her eyes, looked at them while nearly crying, then fled from the room. Dugan looked after her.

"It didn't hurt her?" asked the old man. "She ran out of the room?" He seemed disappointed.

"Yes! You old—" Dugan bit off his angry words. After all, it was none of his affair. If the inmates of this private asylum chose to give each other impromptu showers, let them go to it; but he didn't have to hang around. Ten miles wasn't such a staggering distance. At three miles per hour, he would reach the village by midnight at the latest. He shivered as he shoved his chair back from the table. He would walk twenty miles before he spent one midnight in this house.

"Will you sign the receipts now, Mr. Crane?" he asked in his best business voice.

"Plenty o' time, plenty o' time," Crane waved him away.

But Dugan was firm. He took his fountain pen from his pocket and, spreading the papers on the table, held the instrument out to the old man.

"But you gotta stay," the old man argued. "It's our chance to get rid of her forever. You can see her and tell us where she is."

"I'm sorry, but I must be going," Dugan returned, still holding the pen out for the older man.

CRANE LOOKED DOWN at the pen, then at the papers. A crafty light came into his eyes and he took the pen and signed the papers quickly.

Dugan then offered the pen to Mrs. Crane, thankful they weren't going to delay him by reading the papers before they signed. Mrs. Crane looked questioningly at Mr. Crane for guidance, holding the fountain pen loosely in her fingers.

"Go on, Mary," he said with a smile that Dugan found very definitely disagreeable. "Sign the papers for Mr. Dugan."

Obediently she sat down to sign her name. Mr. Crane went to the doorway.

"Marcia!" he shouted. "Marcia! Mr. Dugan wants you to sign some papers."

A chill sense of foreboding struck through Dugan when the old man turned on him with a smile. The old woman was watching her husband with a slight smile on her lips.

Dugan saw Marcia come to the doorway and stand there silently watching the trio in the room. She had dried her face, but her dark hair still glistened with moisture.

Dugan looked back at the table hastily. He was determined to have no part of the old man's obvious plan to trap the girl. His sympathies were with her; when he saw that haunting fear in her eyes that spoke plainly of self-doubt, he

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wanted to help her. She had spoken of months of silence— Did the old pair never speak to her? They acted as though they didn't even see her.

The old man started toward the door again. The girl slipped quickly inside the room. The old man placed his hand at the side of his mouth and shouted, "Marcia! Marcia! Mr. Dugan wants you!"

He stepped back from the doorway, entirely unaware that the girl was standing within two feet of him.

Dugan stared at the girl, seeking an explanation.

She shrugged with an attempt at indifference that was transparently pitiful. "It's always like that," she said quietly. "They can't see me. They can't hear me. They can't even feel me when they touch me! Sometimes I think they are mad. Then I think I am! But you see me —and hear me, don't you?"

Her eyes met his and he saw their pleading. He tried to speak, but his mouth was dry.

"Don't you?" she cried, eyes widening with fright. "Say something! Tell me you hear me! I'm not a ghost! I tell you I'm *not!* I feel, and I hear, and love—just like I always have. I'm *not* a ghost!"

Dugan glanced at the old man. Mr. Crane was suspicious of Dugan's intent stare. Their eyes met. The old man chuckled evilly and scurried from the room. His wife signed the last paper hastily and followed him.

MARCIA'S shoulders sagged with discouragement, and she turned to leave.

"Wait!" Dugan said in a low voice.

She turned quickly back and her eyes sought his, a smile trembling on her lips.

"You *do* see me?" she asked breathlessly.

He nodded, not daring to speak. Something was sticking in his throat, choking him. He felt almost like blubbering.

"And hear me?" she pursued eagerly.

"Yes, of course," he said thickly.

Quickly deciding his course, he stuffed the papers back into his pocket and capped his fountain pen and thrust it after them.

"Listen, I don't know whether you're mad, or not. But in any case, you are not as mad as they are. You're coming with me. Get a coat and hat and we—"

He stopped speaking and sat down weakly. He had forgotten that his car was wrecked. He couldn't ask her to walk ten miles.

"Oh, I couldn't!" she gasped, but her shining eyes showed that she found the proposition attractive. "What if *they* couldn't see, or hear me, either? I would go mad if I had to walk down the street and not have anybody know I was there."

"You'll go thoroughly mad here, too," Dugan said.

He heard the old man at the door again and started violently. The old fool was laying a string of small onions across the threshold. Dugan watched him as incuriously as possible and lighted a cigarette to help his jumping nerves. Then he had to smile as he thought what would happen if someone said "Boo!" to him.

The girl smiled, too, uncertainly. She came to his side.

"Let me have your pen," she said. "I'll sign those papers. I've been selfish—but I won't keep you here."

Dugan's legal caution fought with his impulses. Then the ten miles tipped the scales again. He watched her as she signed the legal documents. He wished he could have

more time to know this girl that attracted him so strongly.

He folded the papers slowly and returned them to his pocket. He drew a chair closer to hers and looked into her face.

"When did it all start?" he asked.

She hesitated.

"Never mind," he said quickly. "There I go sticking my neck out again. It's none of my business, I know."

"It isn't that," she contradicted.

"—none of my business," he repeated, then added harshly, "but I am going to make it my business. I'm going into the village tonight, and tomorrow I am going to bring an alienist out here to find out just who is and who is not crazy."

"No!" she cried, one hand going to her throat.

"Yes!" he contradicted grimly. "Tomorrow morning." Then he added softly, "And I am pretty sure that I know who is and that you aren't. So don't be afraid to prove it."

"Please! Don't!"

Dugan ignored her plea. "Tell me," he said with a smile. "Your grandparents never cared for your mother, did they?"

She looked at him quickly, then turned away.

"Did they?" he insisted.

"No," she said faintly. "But how did you guess?"

His smile became triumphant. "A lawyer finds a knowledge of psychology useful. And as some clients and jurymen are pretty damn queer, abnormal psychology shouldn't be neglected, either. Your grandparents are old-fashioned—terribly old-fashioned, aren't they?"

She nodded, but kept her face averted. It was as though she couldn't bear looking at him.

"And your father knew it. That's why he tied his estate up so they could have no legal control over you."

"I . . . I guess so," she admitted in a smothered voice.

DUGAN PLACED his hand on her shoulder and gently urged her to face him. Slowly she turned. Her eyes were starlike with unshed tears.

"Will you tell me?" he asked quietly.

"What?" she countered faintly.

"The whole story," he said. "Why did they dislike your mother? Why did that dislike come to hurt you in this way?"

"I don't know," she confessed. "They always said dad threw himself away when he married mother. And that I looked and acted just like her. I haven't always lived here, you know."

"You came to live here when your father died, didn't you?"

"Yes. Mr. Frobisher said it would be best for me to live with relatives, even though he and Mr. Martel were my legal guardians. Oh, I'm sure dad never meant it to be this way! He knew they were like this! He knew they hated me. I tried to tell Mr. Frobisher, but he didn't believe me. Dad never thought it was wrong to go to parties and have good times, and meet pleasant people, but *they* did. And when I didn't quit when they told me, they called me awful names and said I was just like my mother, and that it was a pity that a Crane had ever seen either of us."

The tears started from her eyes and she ceased speaking suddenly and buried her face against his chest.

He patted her shoulder clumsily, thinking to soothe her, but he couldn't quiet the strong quickening of his own pulse. She was a delicious armful. He took a deep breath

and tried to become a lawyer before it was too late.

"I . . . it all is a dirty mess," he said. "They ignored you for weeks, didn't they?"

She nodded her head and choked.

"Then you noticed that they acted strange when you were around —acted as though they were afraid?"

She nodded again.

He was silent for a moment, then said musingly, "I think Frobisher & Martel have been very lax in their guardianship, but as a very junior member of the firm I am going to take a hand in the game. Tomorrow I'll come for you and we'll find a place in town for you to stay. You won't have to stay here any more."

He waited a moment for her to say something. She ceased crying, but remained silent. He continued:

"I'll stay here tonight after all to see that nothing happens to you. The old fool just put garlic in the doorways to keep you in this room. No telling what he would do next. Now, come on, run to bed and get a good night's sleep. This will be your last night here."

"Then *they* are crazy?" she asked, lifting her head from his chest and looking up at him.

"Well, let's say quietly mad," he modified. "They hated—there is no other word for it—your mother and you so much, wished never to see you, that their wishes were granted. They are pretty old, you know. It's quite common for people to see things that are not; a less well known mental phenomenon is, *not* to see things that are real—a flight from reality. Naturally, when they saw you reading books, saw the books and not you, and saw food disappearing, and all that—well, of course, their first thought was that you had killed yourself and come back to haunt them. Serves them right, too, I'd say. I hope they've had a merry time of it."

Suddenly she drew his head down and pressed her lips to his. Without conscious command, his arms went around her. Psychology—especially abnormal psychology—was the least of his worries for several breathless seconds.

"Lady," he said with breathless pomposity, "you certainly are not a ghost."

She laughed happily and darted out of the room. Dugan smiled as he noticed the little row of garlic which the old man had supposed would stop her. Still smiling happily, he listened to the ancient stairs creak as she went up to her room. There was the shattering thunder of an explosion, a shrill cry of terror, and the smile faded from his face.

DUGAN LEAPED to the doorway through which she had gone, ran down the unlighted hall. He heard

another shot on the stairway and the sound of a falling body. It thumped downward loosely. A red rage rose in his brain and crimsoned his sight.

The old woman was standing in the doorway to the parlor, a frightened semirealization of what had been done showing on her seamed face. But at the same time her eyes gleamed with satisfaction, a secure light showing her belief that the ghost had been banished.

Dugan wanted to smash his fist into her aged face, to hide that light in her eyes with her own blood. Then he saw the crumpled figure at the foot of the stairs and went down on his knees beside it.

The pistol thundered again and the bullet splintered the floor only a few inches from the motionless body. Dugan's head lifted. He saw the old man sitting halfway up the stairs in the semidarkness, laughing shrilly, madly.

"Did I get her?" he demanded, and pulled the trigger again. The bullet splintered into the door. "Did I get her? The book said silver bullets'd do it. Did I get her?"

It was only half a dozen strides, covering three and four steps at a time. Dugan made it before the old man could pull the trigger again. He wrenched the weapon from the old man's weak grasp and clasped the butt of the pistol in his own palm, his forefinger on the trigger.

The barrel pointed at the old man's chest. His finger was tightening on the trigger, but slowly. He wanted the old man to realize he was going to die. The old woman screamed.

Still only madness showed in the old man's eyes as he demanded gleefully: "Tell me, son! Did I get her like the book said I would? Did I?"

"Mr. Dugan! Paul! Don't!" It was a woman's voice. Dugan ignored it. She'd be next. He'd make a clean job of it.

"Paul! Paul! Don't shoot him! He didn't hit me!"

"Did I get her, son?" the old man chuckled. "Did the silver bullet kill her like the book said?"

Dugan's finger left the trigger, and he shoved the pistol into his pocket as he turned on the stairway. Marcia was coming up to meet him.

They met, and his arm went around her shoulders. He was trembling, but so was she.

"Did he hurt you, sweetheart?" he asked shakily.

"No, I guess he couldn't see me and shot too quick. But the bullets went right over my head and everything went black for a minute. I was afraid you were going to kill him."

"I was," Dugan admitted dully. "Come on! Ten miles isn't so damn far."

He led her to his car, still grasping her hand as though fearing something might happen to her if he released her. He had to, though, to dig his flashlight out of the panel locker. But when that was accomplished he quickly resumed possession of her hand and they went to the road.

"This is going to compromise you," he warned, voice still a little unsteady.

She laughed softly. "I've been a ghost so long that it will be a pleasure to be compromised—by you. I'll make you marry me."

Her laugh was the final assurance he needed, and he laughed from pure relief. "You, as a ghost, have nothing to do with the matter," he said with mock stubbornness. "I'm doing the compromising—I'll do the proposing."

GATEWAY

by ROBERT ARTHUR

The little man was there all right—but the doors he walked through weren't!

Illustrated by Koll

HORACE GOLDER was reflecting with regret that his morning's outing was over and it was time for him to return to his apartment, his family, and Sunday dinner, when behind him he heard an iron door clang shut with a screech of rusty hinges.

He was standing on the greensward of Central Park, watching a swan glide across the bright bosom of a pond. With the swan's shrill metallic tones ringing in his ears it did not occur to him for a moment that it was impossible for an iron door to be behind him, or any place else in the vicinity. Particularly one as large and solid as this had sounded—

Then he gave a little gasp and turned with such celerity that he slipped to one knee, getting—as Hannah would be sure to point out with acid asperity—a bad grass stain on his only good pair of trousers.

There was, of course, nothing there. For fifty yards the well-trimmed grass sloped upward to an asphalt walk. Beyond that were a group of weathered glacial rocks, some maples incandescent with the red and gold of autumn, and beyond them the façades of Fifth Avenue's great, cubelike apartment houses.

But no iron door, naturally—

Then Horace Golder gasped again, a quick, excited intake of breath. Behind their steel-rimmed spectacles, his blue eyes, washed pale by drudging years of bookkeeping, took on a new brightness. Still on one knee, he stared at the bony hand and sinewy wrist which had appeared in the air eight feet away, on a level with his eyes.

The fingers of the hand were curled downward, as if clasped about something solid. The hand seemed to be pushing at something. Cords in the wrist stood out, indicating muscular exertion, and hinges squealed again.

The hand and wrist moved forward a foot or so, bringing into view an arm encased in a sleeve of black material that seemed to belong to an ancient frock coat.

Then, as Horace Golder's heart pounded with a queer, unnamed excitement, the fingers unclasped and the hand dropped downward. The whole arm disappeared. But even as it vanished, the individual to whom it belonged came into view.

He appeared as a man might come into sight from behind a corner or through an open door—except that there was no door. First a foot, encased in a well-patched black shoe. Then leg, knee, and—with too great a rapidity to break his appearance down into its component parts—a complete man.

The unexpectedly appearing individual was below middle height, being several inches shorter than Horace Golder, and somewhat pudgy. He was oddly attired in a frock coat

The peculiarly dressed gentleman was, obviously, stepping out of a doorway. But there was no doorway there—

of ancient cut, dark trousers equally outmoded, a stand-up collar, flowing four-in-hand tie and a somewhat shaggy beaver tophat. Strapped about his waist, outside the frock coat, was a wide belt of scuffed leather from which a great iron ring, heavy with massive old keys, hung.

HORACE GOLDER, however, focused his attention not upon the clothing but upon the wearer. The small gentleman just turning toward him had a round and rather worried countenance, thinning gray hair, and gray eyes that blinked at Horace from behind ancient hexagonal spectacles.

"Good afternoon," the little man said, bobbing his head. "Lovely weather, isn't it?"

Horace Golder automatically rose to his feet, but the other did not wait for a reply. He turned. Stooping, he reached toward the ground. His hand disappeared for a moment. Then he rose and it reappeared, now holding a large goatskin bag. This he set down at his feet, after which he fumbled at the iron ring attached to his belt, with some difficulty at last detaching a large rusty key.

With the key in his hand, he appeared to take hold of something beside him and push. Hinges squealed again, metal clashed on metal, and metallic overtones filled the air with echoes.

"*Whew!*" The frock-coated little man let out a long breath. "These old hinges do rust up. Soon fix that, though."

He bent over his goatskin bag, loosened a drawstring, plunged his hand in, and brought out an iron hammer and a small pottery jug with a long pointed snout.

Thrusting the hammer into his belt, he moved a few feet to his left and lifted the jar upward to a point above his head. There he tipped it. A little oil spilled outward. Horace Golder heard the clay chink against iron, and the spill of oil ceased, though the jar was tilted farther and held there for several seconds.

The little man repeated the process at two other points directly below the first, and replaced the jug in the goatskin sack.

"There!" He straightened with an air of satisfaction. "That'll fix 'em. They'll work easy next time, though for the life of me *I* don't know of anybody who'll be wanting to use this door."

He glanced at Horace Golder, as if expecting a suggestion, but Horace, in his surprise, merely shook his head as if to indicate that he had no idea either.

He brought out the key and inserted it into an imaginary—at least, an invisible—keyhole. A twist, and the key turned. Horace Golder heard a large metal tongue click home. The little man put the key back on the ring at his waist and seized hold of something that, by the way his hands curved about it, might have been a large ring bolt. Alternately he jerked and thrust. A faint metallic rattling answered his efforts.

Satisfied, he desisted, and with a large green handkerchief taken from the breast pocket of his frock coat, wiped his pink brow.

"There," he sighed, "that's five looked at. One more, and I'm going to eat. They can't begrudge me *that!*" The little man cast a dark look toward the invisible door. "If I don't finish them all today, I don't finish, and that's all there is to it. Ritual or no ritual, stars or no stars, a man can only do so much in one day. And if another twenty years has to pass, let it, I say. There's no hurry."

With that he bent and hoisted the

goatskin bag to his shoulders. It was obviously heavy, for the weight of it made him stoop. Horace Golder swallowed hard, and tried to keep the eagerness out of his voice.

"Let me help you," he suggested. "Just out for the air—little exercise won't hurt—do me good—don't get nearly enough—"

The little man removed the sack from his shoulder with alacrity.

"Well," he began, "it's a bit heavy, what with my tools and oil cans and lunch, and what not. But if you're sure—"

Horace Golder settled that by taking the sack.

THEY FOLLOWED as straight a line as the topography of Central Park would permit. Horace Golder's companion cut cheerfully across the grass while Horace, brought up with a great respect for rules and regulations, kept an apprehensive eye open for minions of the law.

It was at a point a couple of hundred yards west of the Metropolitan Museum that Horace Golder's guide came to a halt. Horace, too winded with the weight of the sack to speak, dropped it with a sigh of relief to the grass. The bag emitted mysterious clanking sounds and subsided. The little man bent over it, drew out the oil jar again, and from his belt plucked the hammer.

"First," he announced aloud, "to see if there's any weak spots. These old doors do rust a bit, you know."

Grasping the hammer firmly, he struck at various points in the empty —to Horace Golder, at least—air between two towering elms. A great clangor filled the air—the rolling reverberations of iron clashing on iron, so loud and thunderous that Horace jumped and looked about fearfully.

The noise seemed to attract no attention from the few distant strollers, however, and a moment later the little man shoved the hammer back into his belt.

"Sound," he said cheerily. "Sound as the day Alfgar forged it. There was a man, Alfgar. If anybody nowadays had one tenth his brains—"

He shook his head, as if to imply much he did not care to put into words.

"Now to see if she'll open," he announced, and extracted another weighty key from his ring. He shoved this forward, twisted it, and again Horace heard bolts slide back.

The little man, leaving the key to hang there, as it seemed, in the empty air, grasped an invisible lever, turned it, and pulled. He moved backward a few steps. The key followed him. There was only a faint squeal of hinges. The frock-coated man stopped pulling and looked, pleased, toward Horace.

"Well!" he said, "that one was easy. I'll give it a bit of oil—not because it needs it, but so no one can say I'm skimping my duty."

He took up the spouted jar and applied it.

"There, that's done," he stated. "And now I'm going to eat. I said I would when I finished this one, and I shall. We'll leave it open till after. Let the oil soak into the pins. And besides, I like to watch the pretty creatures play as I sup."

He plumped himself down on the grass and glanced up, inquiringly.

"Will you join me in my victuals?" he asked. "Today I have aplenty. Fixed them myself. *Those* ones"—he jerked his head over his shoulder as Horace Golder quickly seated himself, all thought of Hannah and dinner having fled—"*they* don't care if a hard-working man goes hungry. All they think about is dancing and singing and games all day."

He pulled the goatskin sack to-

ward him. From it he took a parcel wrapped in linen. Unwrapped, he revealed a stone flask, a fine brazen bowl, lidded, which proved to be filled with fruit Horace could not put a name to, and a small hamper containing a cold fowl that had been, by the marks, roasted on a spit.

With an odd, bronze-colored knife he cut the fowl in half and on the point held out one segment.

"China pheasant," he announced, "from Queen Halimar's own gardens. With pomegranates and rose wine, just right for a little outing such as this. A bit coarse, but the exercise gives one an appetite."

He placed his beaver hat on the ground beside him, tucked a square of linen into his collar, and seized his half of fowl in both hands. Beaming at Horace Golder, he set to work with hearty appetite.

"They *are* gay creatures," he murmured, swallowing a bite of pheasant and loosening his grip on the bird's carcass to gesture with one hand at a point beyond them. "But it does one's heart good to see them dancing among the fountains. Seventy-seven fountains there are, and seventy-seven maidens in Queen Halimar's retinue. Every one of them more lovely than Helen or Guinivere, every one wearing silks of a different color. With the sun making rainbows in the spray of the fountains, the strings and brasses of the musicians tinkling, the peacocks strutting in their pride and the fawns nibbling at the grass beneath the yew trees—"

He shook his head and tackled the pheasant again.

"Is it not a fair sight?" he asked. "Do the fountains not make sweet music? The breeze is blowing this way, bringing their tune to us. And the scent of the honeysuckle and the violets."

Horace Golder found himself trembling slightly, so intently was he trying to see what his companion saw. Nothing was there, however, nothing but the massive masonry of the museum, the trees, the blue sky beyond, a few wind-spun clouds.

But if his eyes could see nothing, his ears and nose were more successful. There *was* a breeze blowing softly in their faces. And riding on it came a faint, far tinkling, silvery and sweet, as if the wind itself were plucking the strings of a hundred lutes, while, strong and heady, the scent of honeysuckle and violets reached his nostrils.

Horace Golder breathed deep. He closed his ears to the raucous honking of taxis on Fifth Avenue, to the scream of clashing gears; closed his nostrils to the smell of gasoline fumes, and for the moment was aware only of the sweet, distant tinkling of falling water, the soft scent of flowers.

He shut his eyes, and girls' voices came to him—faint and faraway—filled with mirth and laughter.

"A pretty sight." His companion's voice caused him to open his eyes again, and he found that the little man was holding out a golden goblet filled with rose-colored wine. "They don't know what work means. But it doesn't matter. I can worry about that. That's why I'm Queen Halimar's steward. To attend to just such things as minding the gates and keeping the accounts, casting horoscopes and reading runes, following the stars and working such small magics as may be called for."

Horace took the wine, touched it to his lips, and with the first taste youth seemed to flow through him. He leaned back against the trunk of a young elm. Throwing back his head, he quaffed the cupful. In-

stantly his veins were singing, and delight like a young man's first knowledge of love suffused him.

"I have never drunk such wine," he acknowledged solemnly, setting down the empty goblet. "In fact, I have seldom drunk wine at all. My wife does not approve. It is a bad example, she says, for the children. But"—and Horace Golder shook his head—"I sometimes think, though they *are* my children, that any example, however good, is completely wasted upon them. I do not really care—"

He had been about to say that he did not really like his children, or his wife either, in his heart, but realized in time what he was saying and caught himself with a sense of shock. It was not a thing a man could well say to a stranger, or even think to himself—at least, Horace Golder couldn't.

His companion nodded knowingly.

"My wife, too, God bless her, frowned upon the brimming cup. But otherwise she was amiability itself. I have not married again, though Queen Halimar has offered me the choice of all her maidens, each of whom is more fair than the others."

He passed the brazen bowl of pomegranates, and Horace Golder, busy upon the cold fowl, took one.

"Excuse me," the little man said with sudden contrition. "I have not told my name. I am Fuliman, steward to Queen Halimar, Court Astrologer, Minder of the Gates, and Royal Librarian."

"I'm Horace Golder," Horace answered, his tongue the slightest bit thick. "I'm an accountant. I live over there"—he waved his hand—"on East Ninetieth Street. I have a wife and two children. The reason I'm here today is because every Sunday when the weather is good I come over to the park to be alone for a while. I got my doctor to tell my wife I had to walk, for the exercise."

"Horacegolder," Fuliman repeated the appellation. "It is a good name. It would go well with magic working and casting runes. You are a young man, too, and well-favored, yet withal having an air of soberness and reliability. Eh, well, have more rose wine."

Horace Golder drank again, and ate, and all the many questions that had trembled on his tongue from the moment Fuliman first appeared somehow were forgotten. His companion was unhurried and as they sat there in the late autumn sun time passed like a song. Above Horace's head an old iron key still hung in emptiness, to attract a curious glance from a passerby, if there had been any. But none troubled them. They ate and drank, and the breeze that caressed their brows brought still the faraway tinkling of many fountains and the scent of flowers, and occasionally carried to their ears the clash of metal on metal, the neighing of a stallion, or the measured clangor of a great brass gong.

"They are jousting beyond the castle," Fuliman remarked. "The nobles, twenty in black armor on black stallions against twenty in white armor on white stallions. It is a fine spectacle to watch, and sometimes from my room in the south tower I look down upon the tourney field through my viewing glasses. It makes me feel much like a god, to gaze down upon the bright fair land, the fluttering pennants, the prancing horses, and the clashing knights.

"There are other sports, too," he went on, biting thoughtfully into a pomegranate, "in which I once took part. Boar hunting in the queen's

forest, and falconing over the downs and meadows. But I stick close to my books now, for my joints have lost their suppleness and I take less delight in games.

"I— But, by the beard of Alfgar, the day has almost passed and there is still the seventh gate to be seen to! Come, friend Horacegolder, we must hurry. Wait here a moment while I fetch water for washing."

Fuliman scrambled to his feet. Seizing up the brass bowl that had held the pomegranates, he strode forward—and vanished. Horace blinked. Fuliman was gone. But on the grass still lay the goatskin bag, the remnants of a meal—

Then Fuliman had returned. He stood before Horace and held in both hands the brass bowl, filled now with water.

"Wash," he invited. "I'll gather up my things."

Horace plunged both hands to the wrist in the clear cold water, and electricity seemed to run up his arms. He removed his spectacles and splashed the liquid on his face. His skin tingled, grew firmer. He could feel the lines in his cheeks and brow iron out.

He gazed at his reflection in the water, and the face of a young man looked back at him. Then with a square of linen as soft as rose petals he dried himself. When he had replaced his glasses he viewed again his image in the bowl, and saw that he looked now like Horace Golder, harassed accountant. But for just a moment he had been twenty again—

Fuliman took the bowl, tossed out the remaining water, thrust it into the goatskin sack.

"Almost sundown," he muttered in evident agitation. "It would not do, it would not do at all, for the setting sun to catch me. Now, where is that key? I was certain—"

Horace Golder pointed.

"There," he said. Fuliman looked up, and nodded. With one hand he swung shut the iron door that Horace could not see. The familiar clang of metal on metal followed his thrust. Fuliman turned the key, and bolts slid home.

"There," he said, "that one's finished with. Now just one more, the last—the one I always hate to do. The seventh gate. If you—"

But Horace had already shouldered the sack. Fuliman set off northward again, the keys at his belt jangling merrily. Horace Golder followed, a spring in his legs that had not been present for years.

PRESENTLY, beyond the Metropolitan, Fuliman turned to the east. He continued that way until they were out of the park and had crossed Fifth Avenue. For the first time that afternoon they were among other persons. But the few people strolling on the avenue were homeward bound, and Fuliman's antiquated formal attire attracted slight attention.

The shadows were lengthening down the side streets that they crossed, going northward again. Across the park the sun was dropping redly toward the serried cliffs of apartment houses. Fuliman broke into a dogtrot. Horace kept at his heels. They crossed Eighty-eighth Street, and continued on to Ninetieth Street. Then Fuliman swung right.

For some reason he could not fathom, Horace Golder felt choked by a queer, electric excitement. They were hurrying now in the direction of his own apartment, just east of Lexington Avenue. Hannah would be waiting for him, her tongue

sharpened on the grindstone of her impatience, but he did not care. He had hardly a thought for her as he hastened after the odd little man in the frock coat.

Fuliman came to a stop on the pavement, on the far side of Lexington Avenue, having narrowly escaped being run down by a truck. He mopped his brow in agitation with his green handkerchief.

"Things have indeed changed," he gasped to Horace. "It's worth a man's life to venture out into a road. I would not be caught here by the setting sun for all the treasure of lost Cathay. You can understand why I leave this one until the last, and would omit it altogether if I could."

"Is it . . . is it close?" Horace Golder found himself impelled to ask.

"Fifty paces," Fuliman answered, and Horace Golder made a quick estimate. Fifty paces would bring them directly in front of his apartment house—

They did. And there Fuliman paused, his round face troubled.

"It's awkward," he muttered, mopping his features again. "Most awkward."

"You . . . you have to go inside?" Horace asked, the words coming with difficulty.

Fuliman nodded. "It makes it most difficult," he said, his voice unhappy. "The last two inspections I was at my wit's end. In fact, last time I was forced to omit it altogether and hurry back to the sixth gate. I barely made it. The sun was so nearly down—"

He shuddered slightly.

"And I haven't the faintest idea—"

"It's perfectly all right," Horace Golder interrupted boldly. "I live here. In the front ground-floor apartment. That's the one you mean, isn't it? I'll let you in."

He led the way into the ground-floor hall of the old brownstone building and paused outside his own apartment door. He listened, but could catch no sound indicating that his wife was within.

Reassured, he unlocked the door and led Fuliman into the living room, which looked out on the sidewalk. Fuliman gazed about him with an expression of relief.

"A quarter of the hour," he commented, glancing at Horace's electric mantel clock. "And today the sun sets at five. Time sufficient, but I must move this."

Horace seized hold of the old mohair sofa Fuliman indicated and yanked it into the center of the room, with scant regard for Hannah's passion for neatness. Fuliman nodded, and took from his ring a pair of keys, smaller than the previous ones had been.

One he trust into a spot some two feet from Horace's flowered wallpaper. Bolts clicked, and Fuliman pulled. Hinges made protest.

"No oil for forty years. They're tight and rusty," the little man muttered, and made haste to apply the oil jar.

"Give them a moment to let the oil soak in," he said aloud, "and they'll be less noisy— Back!" he interrupted himself. "Back, girl!"

He was apparently addressing the wall. But something, coming from nowhere, struck Horace Golder lightly on the forehead and dropped to the rug, where it gleamed with a milky, luminous glow that shed light for inches about it.

"The minx is being playful," Fuliman said indulgently. "She was passing as I opened the gate, and is

coquetting with you. It is a pearl she has tossed at you."

Horace stooped to pick up the milky object. It was as large as a pigeon's egg, glowing with the pure-white sheen of the finest Oriental pearls. He weighed it in his palm, and its beauty took his breath away.

"She's signaling you to toss it back," Fuliman smiled. "But you might as well keep it. She has dozens more."

"No," Horace Golder answered. "I'll give it back if she wants it."

And he stepped forward, thrusting out his hand, the pearl balanced on his palm.

He half expected his hand to vanish, but it did not. The pearl did, however. Unseen fingers brushed against his with a soft, warm, clinging touch. Playfully they tried to pull him forward. Horace Golder, startled, withdrew his hand hastily. The pearl did not reappear.

Fuliman, who had been gazing at him, nodded as if reaching a decision.

"Horacegolder," he said, "an idea has come to me. I am growing old, and have served as steward for a good hundred years. It is time I had my days to myself. I need an assistant who can keep the books and attend to the business affairs of the kingdom. You impress me as sober, industrious, yet withal a man well suited to the life in our kingdom. Come with me now, and I shall train you to fulfill my duties. They will not be onerous. You will have much time in which to follow your own pursuits—"

Horace Golder gaped at him, and as the full purport of Fuliman's words came to him, his face twisted with urgent longing. But he shook his head.

"No," he said. "I can't. I'm married, you know. Hannah—"

"No matter," Fuliman told him. "You may take any one of Halimar's seventy-seven maidens to wife, if that is all that troubles you. Or none, if you prefer your books better."

Soft laughter reached Horace Golder's ears. The scent of violets and honeysuckle filled the room. But still he shook his head, for it is not easy to discard the ideas of a lifetime.

"No," he said, and his voice was wistful. "I . . . I can't. It wouldn't be the right thing—"

Fuliman nodded, but of the two keys he held, put only one back on the ring at his belt.

"Horacegolder," he directed, "take this key. If, before the sun descends beyond the horizon you change your mind, use it to unlock this gate. I will wait in the grounds beyond. If it opens, I will welcome you. If it does not—but you must choose. With the key in your hand you can step through, if you will it."

Then Fuliman took the goatskin sack up on his shoulder and turned.

"Good-by, Horagegolder," he said, and took a forward step. As a man might vanish through an open door he vanished, and a moment later the dull resonance of iron on iron, of bolts sliding to, echoed about the room.

ALMOST stupidly Horace Golder stood there, staring at the spot where the little man had been, the rough key cold in his fingers. How long he stood he did not know, though it may have been for several minutes. It was the sound of his wife's voice in the hall that startled him into motion.

"Horace!" Hannah's tone was charged with irritation. "Are you in there, Horace? Open the door for me. I'm worn out."

Horace started, and cast a quick glance toward the door.

"Horace!" Hannah's voice was shrill. "Open the door!"

Horace moved, not toward the door, but toward the spot where Fuliman had been. The iron key trembled in his fingers as he reached out and felt a cold metal surface, studded with bolt heads. He found a keyhole. His fingers were as stiff as clothespins as he thrust the key into the orifice.

He twisted at the key, his breath coming in quick, short gasps, and felt it give. His hand found a rough ring bolt. He tugged. Weight gave way, moved toward him.

"Horace!" His wife had used her own latchkey, and the apartment door flew open. "Horace! What are you doing?"

Her voice was so charged with angry command that Horace Golder could not help turning, as he always did when she spoke so. She was standing in the doorway, gazing at him, the two children behind her, their sharp young faces as unpleasant as her sharp older one.

For a moment the command in her voice held him in a species of paralysis, unable to move. And in that moment the hands of the electric clock on the mantel indicated just exactly the hour of five. Five deep gong notes, muted as though coming from a great, an unguessable distance, made quivery echoes in the room. And while the fifth still shivered in the air, something behind Horace clattered sharply to the floor.

He whirled, stared down. It was the key. The iron key Fuliman had left him. The key which had opened the seventh gateway, beyond which Fuliman had promised to wait. It had fallen— Horace Golder thrust out a trembling hand. Wildly he felt for a door, unseen, but hard, cold, solid— And his frantic fingers encountered nothing. *Nothing*—

Then he remembered. Sundown. It had something to do with sundown. And today, Fuliman had said, sundown was at five. Which had just struck. Had struck and passed him by—

Then Horace Golder knew what had happened. Calm replaced the momentary chaos of his thoughts. His wife was staring at him almost as if in fright.

"Horace, you're drunk!" she cried wrathfully. "Drunk and messing up the apartment! Where have you been all day? What have you been doing? Answer me, Horace! Account for yourself. What? What did you mumble just then?"

Horace passed a hand across his forehead. Suddenly he was tired. Very tired. He gave a little sigh. And then he managed a smile.

He stooped, picked up the rusty, ancient key that lay on the floor. For an instant, as he touched it, faintly to his nostrils came the scent of honeysuckle and violets. Then he thrust it into his pocket, and with his fingers still touching its comforting solidity, he turned again toward Hannah.

"I only said, my dear," he murmured, "that it just occurred to me that in twenty years I will still be only fifty-six."

"Fifty-six!" his wife snorted. "And what is going to happen when you're fifty-six?"

Horace Golder shook his head, and behind their spectacles his faded blue eyes were bright.

"I don't know," he told her. "But something exciting will, I'm sure. I have a feeling— And now, my dear, may I help you off with your things?"

"DERM FOOL"

by THEODORE STURGEON

It wasn't exactly a disease—but it was annoying to have to collect the arms and legs and torsos every day—

Illustrated by M. Isip

I AM NOT generally a fussy man. A bit of litter around my two-and-a-half-room dugout on the West Side seldom bothers me. What trash that isn't big enough to be pushed out in the hallway can be kicked around till it gets lost. But today was different. Myra was coming, and I couldn't have Myra see the place this way.

Not that she cared particularly. She knew me well enough by this time not to mind. But the particular *kind* of litter might be a bit—disturbing.

After I had swept the floor I began looking in odd corners. I didn't want any vagrant breeze to send unexplainable evidence fluttering out into the midst of the room—not while Myra was there. Thinking about her, I was almost tempted to leave one of the things where she could see it. She was generally so imperturbable—it might be amusing to see her hysterical.

I put the unchivalrous thought from me. Myra had always been very decent to me. I was a bit annoyed at her for making me like her so much when she was definitely not my type. Crawling under the bed, I found my slippers. My feet were still in them. I set one on top of the mantel and went into the other room, where I could sit down and wrench the foot out of the other slipper. They were odd slippers; the left was much bigger than the right. I swore and tugged at that right foot. It came out with a rustle; I rolled it up in a ball and tossed it into the waste-paper basket. Now let's see—oh, yes, there was a hand still clutching the handle of one of the bureau drawers. I went and pried it off. Why the deuce hadn't Myra called me up instead of wiring? No chance to head her off now. She'd just drift in, as usual. And me with all this on my mind—

I got the index finger off the piano and threw it and the left foot away, too. I wondered if I should get rid of the torso hanging in the hall closet, but decided against it. That was a fine piece. I might be able to make something good out of it; a suitcase, perhaps, or a rainproof sports jacket. Now that I had all this raw material, I might as well turn it to my advantage.

I checked carefully. My feet were gone, so I wouldn't have to worry about them until the morning. My right hand, too; that was good. It would be awful to shake hands with Myra and have her find herself clinging to a disembodied hand. I pulled at the left. It seemed a little loose, but I didn't want to force it. This wasn't a painful disease as long as you let it have its own way. My face would come off any minute now. I'd try not to laugh too much; maybe I could keep it on until she had gone.

I put both hands around my

Myra seemed to enter into the spirit of the occasion. She took off her nose and threw it at the detective—

throat and squeezed a little. My neck popped and the skin sloughed dryly off. Now that was all right. If I wore a necktie, Myra wouldn't be able to see the crinkling edges of skin just above my collarbone.

The doorbell buzzed and I started violently. As I stood up, the skin of my calf parted and fell off like a cellophane gaiter. I snatched it up and stuffed it under a sofa pillow and ran for the door. As I reached it, one of my ears gave a warning crackle; I tore it off and put it in my pocket and swung the door wide.

"David!" She said that, and it meant that she was glad to see me, and that it had been eight months since the last time, and she was feeling fine, and she was sorry she hadn't written, but then she never wrote letters—not to anybody.

She swooped past me into the room, paused as if she were folding wings, shrugged out of her coat without looking to see if I were there behind her to take it, because she knew I was, crossed her long legs and three-pointed gently on the rug. I put a cigarette into one extended hand and a kiss in the palm of the other, and it wasn't until then that she looked at me.

"Why—David! You're looking splendid! Come here. What have you done to your face? It's all crinkly. It looks sweet. You've been working too hard. Do I look nice? I feel nice. Look, new shoes. Snakeskin. Speaking of snakes, how are you, anyway?"

"Speaking of snakes, Myra, I'm going to pieces. Little pieces, that detach themselves from me and flutter in the gusts of my furious laboring. Something has gotten under my skin."

"How awful," she said, not really hearing me. She was looking at her nails, which were perfect. "It isn't because of me, is it? Have you been pining away for me, David? David, you still can't marry me, in case you were going to ask."

"I wasn't going to ask, but it's nice to know, anyway," I said. My face fell, and I grabbed it and hid it under my coat. She hadn't seen, thank heavens! That meant I was relatively secure for a few hours. There remained only my left hand. If I could get rid of it—good heavens! It was already gone!

It might be on the doorknob. Oh, she mustn't see it! I went into the foyer and searched hurriedly. I couldn't find it anywhere. Suppose it had caught in her wraps? Suppose it were on the floor somewhere near where she was sitting? Now that I was faced with it, I knew I couldn't bear to see her hysterical. She was such a—a *happy* person to have around. For the millionth time since that skinning knife had slipped, I muttered, "Now, why did this have to happen to *me?*"

I WENT BACK into the living room. Myra was still on the floor, though she had moved over under the light. She was toying curiously with the hand, and the smile on her face was something to see. I stood there speechless, waiting for the storm. I was used to it by this time, but Myra—

She looked up at me swiftly, in the birdlike way she had. She threw her glances so quickly that you never knew just how much she had seen—under all her chatter and her glittering idiosyncrasies was as calm and astute a brain as ever hid behind glamour.

The hand—it was not really a hand, but just the skin of one—was like a cellophane glove. Myra slipped it on her own and peeped through the fingers at me. "Hiya, fellow reptile," she giggled; and suddenly the giggles changed into frightened little squeaks, and she was holding out her arms to me, and her lovely face was distorted by tears so that it wasn't lovely any more, but sweet—oh, so darned sweet! She clung close to me and cried pitifully, "David, what are we going to *do?*"

I held her tight and just didn't know what to say. She began talking brokenly: "Did it bite you, too, David? It bit m-me, the little beast. The Indians worship it. Th-they say its bite will ch-change you into a snake. . . . I was afraid. . . . Next morning I began shedding my skin every twenty-four hours—and I have ever since." She snuggled even closer, and her voice calmed a little. It was a lovely voice, even now. "I could have killed the snake. but I

didn't because I had never seen anything like it, and I thought you might like to have it—so I sent it, and now it's bitten you, and you're losing your skin all the time, too, and—oh-h-h!"

"Myra, don't. Please, don't. It didn't bite me. I was skinning it, and my knife slipped. I cut myself. The snake was dead when I got it. So—*you're* the one who sent it! I might have known. It came with no card or letter; of *course* it was you! How . . . how long have you been this way?"

"F-four months." She sniffed, and blew her pink nose on my lapel because I had forgotten to put a handkerchief in my breast pocket. "I didn't care after . . . after I found out that it didn't hurt, and that I could count on when parts of my skin would come off. I—thought it would go away after a while. And then I saw your hand in a store window in Albuquerque. It was a belt buckle—a hand holding a stick, with the wrist fastened to one end of the belt and the stick to the other; and I bought it and saw what it was, because the hand was stuffed with the perfumed moulage you always use for your humming-bird brooches and things—and anyway, you were the only one who *could* have designed such a fascinating belt, or who *would* have thought to use your own skin just because . . . because you happened to have it around—and I hated myself then and l-loved you for it—" She twisted out of my arms and stared into my eyes, amazement written on her face, and joy. "And I do love you for it, right *now*, David, *now*, and I never loved anyone else before and I don't care"—she plucked my other ear, and the skin rustled away in her hand—"if you *are* all dilapidated!"

I saw it all now. Myra's crazy desire to climb a mesa, one of those island tableaux of the desert, where flora and fauna have gone their own ways these thousand thousand years; her discovering the snake, and catching it for me because I was a combination taxidermist and jeweler, and she had never seen anything like it and thought I might want it. Crazy, brave thing; she had been bitten and had said nothing to anybody because "it didn't hurt"; and then, when she found out that I had the same trouble, she had come streaking to New York to tell me it was her fault!

"If you feel that way about it, Myra," I said gently, "then I don't care at all about this . . . this dry rot . . . little snake in the grass—" I kissed her.

AMAZING STUFF, this cast-off skin. Regularly as clockwork, every twenty-four hours, the epidermis would toughen, loosen and slip off. It was astonishingly cohesive. My feet would leave their skin inside my slippers, keeping the exact shape of the limb on which it had grown. Flex the dead skin a couple of times, and it would wrinkle in a million places, become limp and flexible. The nails would come off, too, but only the topmost layer of cells. Treated with tannic acid and afterward with wool oil, it was strong, translucent and soft. It took shellac nicely, and a finish of Vandyke-brown oil paint mixed with bronze powder gave a beautiful old-gold effect. I didn't know whether I had an affliction or a commodity.

That snake— It was about four feet long, thicker at head and tail than it was in the middle. It was a lusterless orange, darker underneath than it was on top, but it was highly

fluorescent. It smelled strongly of honey and formic acid, if you can imagine that for yourself. It had two fangs, but one was on top of its mouth and the other on the lower jaw. Its tongue was forked, but at the roots only; it had an epiglottis, seven sets of rudimentary limbs and no scales. I call it a snake because it was more nearly a snake than anything else. I think that's fair. Myra is mostly a Puckish angel, but you can still call her a woman. See? The snake was a little of this and a little of that, but I'll swear its origin was not of *this* earth. We stood there hand in hand, Myra and I, staring at the beast, and wondering what to do about it all.

"We might get rich by renting it to side shows," said Myra.

"Nobody would believe it. How about renting ourselves to the A. M. A.?" I asked.

She wrinkled her nose and that was out. Tough on the A. M. A.

"What are we going to do about it, David?" She asked me as if she thought I knew and trusted me because of it, which is a trick that altogether too many women know.

"Why, we'll—" And just then came the heavy pounding on the door.

Now, there is only one animal stupid enough to bang on a door when there is a bell to ring, and that is a policeman. I told Myra to stay there in the lab and wait, so she followed me into the foyer.

"You David Worth?" asked the man. He was in plain clothes, and he had a very plain face.

"Come in," I said.

He did, and sat down without being asked, eying the whiskey decanter with little but evident hope. "M'name's Brett. H. Brett."

"H. for Halitosis?" asked Myra gently.

"Naw, Horace. What do I look like, a Greek? Hey, headquarters's checkin' on them ornaments o' y'rs, Mr. Worth." The man had an astonishing ability to masticate his syllables. "They look like they're made of human skin. Y'r a taxidoimist, ain'tcha?"

"I am. So?"

"So where'dja get th' ror material? Pleece analysis says it's human skin. What do you say?"

I exchanged a glance with Myra. "It is," I said.

It was evidently not the answer Brett expected. "Ha!" he said triumphantly. "Where'd you get it, then?"

"Grew it."

Myra began to skip about the room because she was enjoying herself. Brett picked up his hat from the floor and clung to it as if it were the only thing he could trust. I began to take pity on him.

"What did they do down there, Brett? Microscopic cross-section? Acid and base analyses?"

"Yeah."

"Tell me; what have they got down there—hands?"

"Yeah, and a pair o' feet. Book ends."

"You always did have beautiful feet, darling," caroled Myra.

"Tell you what I'll do, Brett," I said. I got a sheet of paper, poured some ink onto a blotter, and used it as a stamp pad. I carefully put each fingertip in the ink and pressed it to the paper. "Take that down to headquarters and give it to your suspicious savants. Tell them to compare these prints with those from the ornaments. Write up your reports and turn them in with a rec-

ommendation that the whole business be forgotten; for if it isn't I shall most certainly sue the city, and you, and anyone else who gets in my way, for defamation of character. I wouldn't consider it impolite, Mr. Brett, if you got out of here right away, without saying good night." I crossed the room and held the door open for him.

His eyes were slightly glazed. He rose and walked carefully around Myra, who was jumping up and down and clapping her hands, and scuttled out. Before I could close the door again he whirled and stuck his foot in it.

"Lissen. I don't know what's goin' on here, see? Don't you or that lady try to leave here, see? I'm havin' the place watched from now on, see? You'll hear from me soon's I get to headquarters, see?"

"You're a big seesee," said Myra over my shoulder; and before I could stop her she plucked off her nose and threw it in the detective's face. He moved away so fast that he left his hat hanging in midair; seconds later we heard the violence of his attempted passage down four flights of stairs when there were only three.

MYRA DANCED three times around the room and wound up at the top of the piano—no mean feat, for it was a bulky old upright. She sat there laughing and busily peeling off the rest of her face.

"A certain something tells me," I said when I could talk, which was after quite awhile, "that you shouldn't have done that. But I'm glad you did. I don't think Detective Inspector Horace Halitosis Brett will be around any more."

Myra gestured vaguely toward her bag. I tossed it to her, and she began dabbing at nose and lips in the skillful, absent way women have. "There," she said when she had finished. "Off with the old—on with the new."

"You're the first woman in creation who gets beauty treatments in spite of herself. Pretty neat."

"Not bad," she said impersonally to her mirror. "Not bad, Myra!"

Thinking of her, watching her, made me suddenly acutely conscious of her. It happens that way sometimes. You know you love the gal, and then suddenly you *realize* it. "Myra—"

I think she had a gag coming, but when she looked at me she didn't say anything. She hopped down off the piano and came over to me. We stood there for a long time.

"You sleep in there," I said, nodding toward the bedroom. "I'll—"

She put her arms around me. "David—"

"Mm-m-m?"

"I'll—have a nice torso for you at 12:48—"

So we stuck around and talked until 12:48.

IT must have been about two weeks later, after we were married, that she started breaking bottles in my laboratory She came into the laboratory one afternoon and caught me cold. I was stirring a thick mass in a beaker and sniffing at it, and was so intent on my work that I never heard her come in. She moved like thistledown when she wanted to.

"What are you cooking, darling?" she asked as she put away a beautiful pair of arms she had just "manufactured."

I put the beaker on the bench and stood in front of it. "Just some . . . sort of . . . er . . . stickum I'm mixing up for— Myra, beat it, will you? I'm busy as—"

She slid past me and picked up the beaker. "Hm-m-m. Pretty. *Snff.* Honey and—formic acid. Using the smell of that beast as a lead, are you? Dr. David Worth, trying to find a cure for a gold mine. It's a cure, isn't it? Or trying to be?" Her tone was very sweet. Boy, was she sore!

"Well . . . yes," I admitted. I drew a deep breath. "Myra, we can't go on like this. For myself I don't care, but to have you spending the rest of your life shedding your epidermis like a . . . a blasted cork oak—it's too much. You've been swell about it, but I can't take it. You're too swell, and it's too much for my conscience. Every time I come in here and start stuffing something of yours, I begin worrying about you. It hasn't been bad, so far—but, woman, think of it! The rest of your life, sloughing off your hide, worrying about whether or not you can find somewhere to take your face off when you're not home; trying to remember where you dropped a hand or a leg. You— Myra, you're not listening."

"Of course I'm not. I never listen to you when you're talking nonsense."

"It isn't nonsense!" I was getting sore.

"I wonder," she said dreamily, sloshing the mess around in the beaker, "whether this thing will bounce." She dropped it on the floor and looked curiously. It didn't bounce. I stood there fumbling for a cuss word strong enough, and wondering whether or not I could move fast enough to poke her one.

"David, listen to me. How long have you been a taxidermist?"

"Oh—eleven years. What's that got—"

"Never mind. And how much money have you saved in eleven years?"

"Well, none, until recently. But lately—"

"Quiet. And you have eight hundred-odd in the bank now. Those stuffed-skin gadgets sell faster than we can make them. And just because you have some funny idea that I don't like to give you my—by-products, you want to cut the water off, go back to stuffing squirrels and humming birds for buttons. David, you're a fool—a derm fool."

"That's not very punny."

She winced. "But here's the main thing, David. You've got this trouble, and so have I. We've been cashing in on it, and will, if only you'll stop being stupid about it. The thing I like about it is that we're partners—I'm *helping* you. I love you. Helping you means more to me than— Oh, David, can't you see? Can't you?"

I kissed her. "And I thought you were just a good sport," I whispered. "And I thought some of it was mock heroics. Myra—" Oh, well. She won. I lost. Women are funny that way. But I still had an idea or two about a cure—

I'D BEEN wrong about the indefatigable Inspector Brett. It was Myra who found out that he was tailing us everywhere, parking for hours in a doorway across the street, and sometimes listening at the door. I'd never have known it; but, as I've pointed out before, Myra has superhuman qualities. When she told me about it, I was inclined to shrug it off. He didn't have anything on us. I had to laugh every time I thought of what must have gone on at police headquarters when they checked up on my fingerprints and those of the hands they had bought in the stores.

The fact that it was human skin, and that the prints were identical in dozens of specimens, must have given them a nasty couple of days. Prove that the axiom about two points and a straight line is false, and where's your whole science of geometry? And prove that there can be not only identical fingerprints, but *dozens* of identical ones, and you have a lot of experts walking around in circles and talking to themselves.

Brett must have appointed himself to crack this case. I was quite willing to let him bang his head against a wall. It would feel nice when he stopped. I should have known Myra better. She had a glint in her eye when she talked about that gang buster.

In the meantime I kept working on that cure. I felt like a heel to skulk around behind Myra's back that way. You see, she trusted me. We'd had that one row about it, and I'd given in. That was enough for her. She wouldn't spy on me when I was working alone in the lab; and I knew that if she did realize it, suddenly, she would be deeply hurt. But this thing was too big. I *had* to do what I was doing, or go nuts.

I had a lead. The formic-honey idea was out, as a cure, though certain ingredients in them, I was sure, had something to do with the cause. That cause was amazingly simple. I could put it down here in three words. But do you think I would? *Heh.* I've got a corner on this market—

But this was my lead: My *hair* never came off! And I wear a miniscule mustache; every time my face came off it left the mustache. I have very little body hair; now, with this trouble, I had none. It came off, for the follicles were comparatively widely separated. First, I thought that this phenomenon was due to a purely physical anchorage of the skin by the hair roots. But, I reasoned, if that had been the case, layer after layer of skin would have formed under my mustache. But that did not happen. Evidently, then, this amazing separative and regenerative process was nullified by something at the hair roots. I could tell you what it was, too, but—I should knife myself in the back!

I worked like a one-armed pianist playing Mendelssohn's "Spinning Song." It took months, but by repeated catalysis and refinement, I finally had a test tube full of clear golden liquid. And—know what it was? Look: I hate to be repetitious, but I'm not saying. Let it suffice that it can be bought by the gallon at your corner drugstore. Nobody knew about it as a cure for my peculiar disease—if you want to call it that—because as far as I know no one had ever seen the disease before. *Bueno.*

Then I went to work on the cause. It didn't take long. As I have said, the most baffling thing about the trouble was its simplicity.

In the windup, I had it. An injection to cause the trouble, a lotion to cure or isolate it. I got ten gallons of each fluid—no trouble, once I knew what to get—and then began worrying about how to break the news to Myra.

"Kirro," I said to her one day, "I want a good face from you tonight. I want to make a life mask of you. Have to get all set first, though. You lose your face at 8:45, don't you? Well, come into the lab at 8:30. We'll plaster you with clay, let it dry so that it draws the face off evenly, back it with moulage, and wash the clay off after the moulage has hardened. Am I brilliant?"

"You scintillate," she said. "It's a date."

I started mixing the clay, though I knew I wouldn't use it. Not to take her face off, anyway. I felt like a louse.

She came in on time as if she hadn't even looked at a clock—how I envy her that trick!—and sat down. I dipped a cloth in my lotion and swabbed her well with it. It dried immediately, penetrating deeply. She sniffed.

"What's that?"

"Sizing," I said glibly.

"Oh. Smells like—"

"*Shh*. Someone might be listening." That for you, dear reader!

I went behind her with a short length of clothesline. She lay back in the chair with her eyes closed, looking very lovely. I leaned over and kissed her on the lips, drawing her hands behind her. Then I moved fast. There was a noose at each end of the line; I whipped one around her wrists, drew it tight, threw it under the back rung of the chair, and dropped the other end over her head. "Don't move, darling," I whispered. "You'll be all right if you keep still. Thrash around and you'll throttle yourself." I put the clock where she could see it and went out of there. I don't want to hear my very best beloved using that kind of language.

She quieted down after about ten minutes. "David!"

I tried not to listen.

"David—please!"

I came to the door. "Oh, David, I don't know what you're up to, but I guess it's all right. Please come here where I can look at you. I . . . I'm afraid!"

I should have known better. Myra was never afraid of anything in her life. I walked over and stood in front of her. She smiled at me. I came closer. She kicked me in the stomach. "That's for tying me up, you . . . you heel. Now, what goes on?"

After I got up off the floor and got my gasping done, I said, "What time is it, bl—er, light of my life?"

"Ten minutes to ni— David! David, what have you done? Oh, you fool! You utter dope! I told you— Oh, *David!*" And for the second and last time in my life, I saw her cry. Ten minutes to nine and her face was still on. Cured!—least, her face. I went behind her where she couldn't reach me.

"Myra, I'm sorry I had to do it this way. But—well, I know how you felt about a cure. I'd never have been able to talk you into taking it. This was the only way. What do you think of me now, stubborn creature?"

"I think you're a pig. Terribly clever, but still a pig. Untie me. I want to make an exit."

I grinned. "Oh, no. Not until the second-act curtain. Don't go away!" I went over to the bench and got my hypodermic. "Don't move, now. I don't want to break this mosquito needle off in your jaw." I swabbed her gently around the sides of the face with the lotion, to localize the shot.

"I . . . hope your intentions are honorable," she said through clenched teeth as the needle sank into the soft flesh under her jawbone. "I— Oh! Oh! It . . . itches. David—"

Her face went suddenly crinkly. I caught her skin at the forehead and gently peeled it off. She stared wide-eyed, then said softly:

"I can't kiss you, marvelous man, unless you untie me—"

So I did, and she did, and we went into the living room where Myra

could rejoice without breaking anything of value.

IN THE middle of a nip-up she stopped dead, brainwave written all over her face. "David, we're going to do some entertaining." She sat there in the middle of the floor and began to scream. And I mean she could scream.

In thirty seconds flat, heavy footsteps—also flat—pounded on the stairs, and Brett's voice bellowed: "Op'n up in th' name o' th' law!" He's the only man I ever met who could mumble at the top of his voice.

Myra got up and ran to the door. "Oh—Mr. Brett. How nice," she said in her best hostess voice. "Do come in."

He glowered at her. "What's goin' *on* here?"

She looked at him innocently. "Why, Mr. Brett—"

"Was you screamin'?"

She nodded brightly. "I like to scream. Don't you?"

"Naw. What'a idear?"

"Oh, sit down and I'll tell you about it. Here. Have a drink." She poured him a tumbler of whiskey so strong I could almost see it raise its dukes. She pushed him into a chair and handed it to him. "Drink up. I've missed you."

He goggled up at her uncertainly. "Well—I dunno. Gee, t'anks. Here's how, Miz Worth." And he threw it down the hatch. It was good stuff. Each of his eyes independently scanned his nose. He blinked twice and regretfully set the glass down. She refilled it, signaling behind her back for me to shut up. I did. When Myra acts this way there is nothing to do but stand by and wonder what's going to happen next.

Well, she got Brett started on the history of his life. Every two hundred words he'd empty that glass. Then she started mixing them. I was afraid that would happen. Her pet—for others' consumption; she wouldn't touch it—was what she called a "Three-two-one." Three fingers of whiskey, two of gin, one of soda. Only in Brett's case she substituted rum for the soda. Poor fellow.

In just an hour and a half he spread out his arms, said, "Mammy!" and folded up.

Myra looked down at him and shook her head. "*Tsk, tsk.* Pity I didn't have any knockout drops."

"Now what?" I breathed.

"Get your hypo. We're going to infect John Law here."

"Now, Myra—wait a minute. We can't—"

"Who says? Come on, David—he won't know a thing. Look—here's what we'll do with him."

She told me. It was a beautiful idea. I got my mosquito, and we went to work. We gave him a good case; shots of the stuff all over his body. He slept peacefully through it all, even the gales of merriment. The more we thought of it— Ah, poor fellow!

After we had what we wanted from him I undressed him and swabbed him down with the lotion. He'd be good as new when he came to. I put him to bed in the living room, and Myra and I spent the rest of the night working in the lab.

When we finished, we took the thing and set it in the living room. Brett's breathing was no longer stertorous; he was a very strong man. Myra tiptoed in and put the alarm clock beside him. Then we watched from the crack of the laboratory door.

The first rays of the sun were streaming through the windows,

lighting up our masterpiece. The alarm went off explosively; Brett started, groaned, clutched his head. He felt around for the clock, knocked it off the chair. It fell shouting under the daybed. Brett groaned again, blinked his eyes open. He stared at the window first, trying vaguely to find out what was wrong with it. I could almost hear him thinking that, somehow, he didn't know where he was. The clock petered out. Brett began to stare dazedly about the room. The ceiling, the walls, and—

There in the geometric center of the room stood Detective Inspector Horace Brett, fully clothed. His shield glittered in the sun. On his face was a murderous leer, and in his hand was a regulation police hogleg, trained right between the eyes of the man on the bed. They stared at each other for ten long seconds, the man with the hangover and the man's skin with the gun. Then Brett moved.

Like a streak of light he hurtled past the effigy. My best corduroy bedspread streaming behind him, clad only in underwear and a wrist watch, he shot through the door—and I mean *through*, because he didn't stop to open it—and wavered shrieking down the stairs. I'd never have caught him if he hadn't forgotten again that there were only three flights of stairs there. He brought up sharp against the wall; I was right behind him. I caught him up and toted him back up to the apartment before the neighbors had a chance to come rubbering around. Myra was rolling around on the floor. As I came in with Brett, she jumped up and kissed his gun-toting image, calling it fondly a name that should have been reserved for me.

We coddled poor Brett and soothed him; healed his wounds and sobered him up. He was sore at first and then grateful; and, to give him due credit, he was a good sport. We explained everything. We didn't have to swear him to secrecy. We had the goods on him. If I hadn't caught up with him, he'd have run all the way to headquarters in his snuggies.

IT WAS NOT an affliction, then; it was a commodity. The business spread astonishingly. We didn't let it get too big; but what with a little false front and a bit more ballyhoo, we are really going places. For instance, in Myra's exclusive beauty shop is a booth reserved for the wealthiest patrons. Myra will use creams and lotions galore on her customer by way of getting her into the mood; then, after isolating the skin on her face, will infect it with a small needle. In a few minutes the skin comes off; a mud pack hides it. The lady has a lovely smooth new face; Myra ships the old one over to my place where my experts mount it. Then, through Myra's ballyhoo, the old lady generally will come around wanting a life mask. I give her a couple of appointments—they amount to séances—sling a lot of hocus-pocus, and in due time deliver the mask—life-size, neatly tinted. They never know, poor old dears, that they have contracted and been cured of the damnedest thing that ever skipped inclusion in "Materia Medica." It's a big business now; we're coining money.

Like all big business, of course, it has its little graft. A certain detective comes around three times a week for a thirty-second shave, free of charge. He's good people. His effigy still menaces our living room, with a toy gun now. Poor fellow.

ON THE KNEES OF THE GODS

By J. ALLAN DUNN

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Concluding a novel of an American vs. the Greek Gods—with the Gods on the winning end!

Illustrated by M. Isip

PART III

Synopsis

Peter Brent, American with a wandering foot, wandered away from an old shrine, ruined and broken down, in modern Greece. But he wandered through a curious laurel hedge—into Greece of three thousand years ago, into a Greece where the gods of ancient Greece still ruled! Pan he met first—and Pan took a liking to Peter Brent, who had considerable of the happy-go-lucky easiness of Pan in himself.

But, being in the land of Zeus, Peter—now Petros—has to take on the local customs, which include running errands for Zeus. The one Zeus assigns isn't nice. He has to get a certain very strange and very wonderful jewel now in the possession of Python, and, while he's about it, rescue Ephryne, one of the daughters of a goddess, whom Python is holding as a hostage. Python likes oxen for dinner, normally—whole, three or four at a time. But it's up to Petros to find out how to get past the monster.

First, though, is the problem of finding him. Petros now begins to learn the old Greek game of "I will if you will." Pan tells him Cheiron either knows or can find out for him, but Cheiron, chief of the centaurs, will want something in return. Peter succeeds in meeting some of the centaurs, who take him to Cheiron.

Cheiron agrees he can find Python, but points out that (a) Peter shows peculiarly bad judgment indeed to go looking for such a creature in the first place, and (b) his centaurs don't like looking for Python—so what does Petros suggest he offer them to do so?

Peter, noticing the cracked, stone-bruised condition of the centaur's hoofs, suggests, brilliantly, that Cheiron ought to have horseshoes. After explaining, Cheiron agrees to seek out Python for a reward of horseshoes—but where are the horseshoes?

Groaning slightly, Peter sets out on another phase of the good old Greek game. Hephaestus, god of the forge, might make them for him, but sea transport necessary to reach Hephaestus is in charge of Poseidon, naturally. With Pan's friendly aid, Peter gets Amphitrite, wife of Poseidon, to supply transport, and sets out for Hephaestus and his Cyclopes, remembering, uneasily, that the principal attribute of the one-eyed breed of giants, as recorded by Homer, was a fondness for human flesh.

He lands and starts to enter Hephaestus' volcano workshop—and meets one of his less-mannerly Cyclopes—

VII.

THE ONE eye of the monster glowed like a hot coal in his low brow, high ridged above his flattened nose set with wide nostrils that

opened and shut as he glared at Peter, snuffling.

He thrust out his tongue between tusks like those of a shark and saliva dripped from his thick lips. He did, or could, not speak, but his greedy grunt needed no translation. His sinewy, furry arms shot out with clutching fingers. His fixed gaze was that of a beast that has cornered its prey, and gloats in the prospect of fresh blood, hot flesh and bones with the marrow alive within them.

His breath stank like a bear's.

Peter skipped back, nimble as a lizard. The Cyclops followed and Peter dodged into a deep crevice with the ogre panting after, back to the light, his bulk shutting it out, with his eye gleaming fitfully. Peter was cornered.

Peter switched on his flash torch, sent the bright ray full into the Cyclops' solitary orb. It dazzled him, startled and scared him as he back up, blinded by the beam.

In his fear he forgot the narrowness of the ledge, with the electric spear of light that bewildered his sluggish brain. He went over the ledge backward with a croaking gasp, hurtling down to crash upon the floor, to lie motionless, as Peter, with his torch still on, came out of the crevice and looked down at him.

Hephaestus set down his jug and shouted: "Who comes unbidden to my realm?"

Peter called back. "One who is upon a mission for Zeus, O Great Hephaestus. One who would have speech with thee."

Peter had long ago decided that the gods all liked a little "yessing," a show of obeisance and recognition of their highness. He turned the lens of his torch to the ledge and made his way down and along it. On the floor of the smithy he could see where he was going.

He tucked the torch away. It might come in useful again when he was looking for Python, and he was not minded to have Hephaestus take a fancy to it, expect it as a gift.

Hephaestus waited for him by his anvil. The fall of the Cyclops and his probable death did not seem to bother him. He stared at Peter, who stared back, conscious that his shadow was pretty plain. But he was tired of playing he was a god. He had determined to talk turkey to Hephaestus, come what may.

"So," said Hephaestus, "Zeus sent you—a mortal—on a mission to me? And you arrived. Now, by all the gods, you have stout entrails, earthling!"

"My task, that Zeus has charged me with, leads me here, Hephaestus, rather than I was told to come by Zeus. I find the mission has its complications."

"Ha! It seems you have a ready wit, earthling. And by the color of your hair you should have fire in your ancestry. One of those complications, I take it, was the hurling down of my guard, Zukon, from the ledge. By the way he lies, I think he is dead."

"He did not want to let me pass," Peter said simply.

"Ho, ho! And so you slew him. And he could have eaten you at one meal and still be hungry. How did you slay him? Did Zeus give you some spare thunderbolts? I make them for him, you know."

"I blinded Zukon with a light I can produce at will, like this."

PETER HAD SLID his flash torch up his sleeve. Now he lifted his arm, grasped it with one hand and pressed the contact through the cloth. The beam seemed to be coming from his other, outstretched hand. He merely

flashed the light once. Hephaestus blinked.

"You have powers above many mortals. What is your name?"

"Peter, or Petros."

"You were not afraid to come down here."

"Not after you laughed when you drove out your Cyclopes. A man who laughs may be trusted."

"You have sound sense for one of your age. Those louts! I cannot get one of them to show any cleverness. My metals need good tempering. The fool at the bellows has no more sense than to blow like a tempest when he should merely send a zephyr through the coal, fan the flame like a butterfly's wing might fan it when the iron needs forced draft. I cannot watch him all the time. I cannot give him intelligence any more than nectar may be made from vinegar."

Peter looked at the great bellows. An idea came to him.

"If you could regulate the draft at will, Hephaestus?"

"I am not Scylla. I have only two arms."

"If the bellows should be arranged so that they would work by being fastened to a beam, and that beam attached to a pedal that could be worked by your foot—"

Hephaestus was swift in thought as the Cyclopes were slow. He immediately caught the general drift of the idea that Peter had seen used in many a smithy.

"Say that again, earthling. It sounds good."

Peter demonstrated with gesture, by a sketch he burned on a plank with a hot iron, lastly with a crude pattern. "In that way," he said, "you would not need a helper for your own delicate inventions when you forge them," he wound up.

"By the blood of Typhon, something lives beneath that red thatch on your poll, Peter! That is an idea worthy of myself. Ask me a boon in return and it is already granted. Now tell me of your task."

"It's a long story," Peter said. He decided to come clean with Hephaestus. There was a rugged something about the fire god that appealed to him. If he had not been a god, Peter would have rated him as being eminently human, of good wit and understanding.

He started at the beginning and left out none of the essentials, though he avoided embroidery. He said nothing about Pan's wood nymphs or Amphitrite's fondling. Hephaestus listened with interest.

"Have a drink," he said. "You will find it good, though it is not nectar. I once gave Cheiron almost a third of a chalice of that. It quite upset the old boy. He thought he was a colt. I can see him now, galloping away and jumping everything in sight. He was gone for half a moon, and when he came back he looked like the wreck of the Argo. Now tell me about those horseshoes. For an earthling you have a most ingenious mind."

Peter decided to be modest. "The horseshoes and the bellows are matters I have known in my own country," he said, and saw he had made a hit with Hephaestus.

"I could use you as an apprentice," he said. "Those Cyclopes of mine are little better than idiots, though at times they amuse me. Did you see them scoot into their holes?"

He poured more wine for both of them. It was heady. Peter blocked a yawn.

"You need sleep and rest after that voyage, my lad. But now watch while I try my hand at a horseshoe and some nails. Let us see if I have got it right. You will

"My hero!" gurgled Ephryne. "You've come to rescue me! Surely Zeus will make you an immortal for this." "Not," thought Peter silently, "if I can help it."

have to work the bellows. Later I'll rig it as you suggest."

THE FIRE GOD worked like a magician, his movements too swift for the eye to follow, the tattoo of his deft, sure blows ringing fast as the drilling of a hungry woodpecker on a well-lardered tree. In no time he had shaped a shoe, pierced it for the holes, plunged it hissing into a pot of water, held it up for Peter's inspection.

Peter suggested a slight change in shape and told Hephaestus about turning up the calks.

The godsmith nodded.

"Now for the nails," Peter said. "They should be soft metal, not to split the hoofs, and they must not rust. And the shoes must be of different sizes."

The nails bothered Hephaestus a little, and Peter could not help him. But the problem was solved at last.

"These are simple things to make, Peter. How many does Cheiron want, think you?"

"I do not know how many centaurs there are."

"I do, and I am not supplying all of them. Not at first, not without some compensation. Do they charge much for these in your country, Peter?"

"It depends." Peter told him the story of the man who agreed to the smith's bargain of one copper coin for the first hole, doubling it for the next, and so on. "He called it off with the second shoe when he found the cost was nearly thirty-three thousand coins," Peter said.

Hephaestus roared, slapped Peter on the back. "I am no good at figures," he cried, wiping his eyes. "They make my head ache. And Cheiron will have to pay me in some other way. I have found him useful before, and may again. I will furnish him enough for fifty, with a special set for himself. Who will teach them how to put them on?"

"I can do that," Peter said, "if Cheiron will make them stand quietly. It is really best to put them on hot, then the shoe sets smoothest. You rasp off the ends of the nails, smooth the hoof."

"Cheiron will make them stand. And you may be sure the old fellow won't use them on his own hoofs until he sees how they work out with the rest. You are quite a genius, my lad."

Peter did not thank him for the compliment and Hephaestus looked at him keenly.

"Something worrying you?"

"I don't know that I should worry about it. I am in for it, anyway. It's the idea of Zeus, his headache. I suppose he's responsible, if he ever feels responsibility for his own performances. But I don't quite like the idea of robbing Python of his property."

"Think nothing of it. The scaly rogue stole it himself from the Colchian witch, Medea. But that is an old tale. Now Hera will flaunt it. And it will cause trouble in Olympus, that gem. Are you perchance married, Peter?"

"No."

"Ha! I am. It is not all bliss. Women are like perfumed flowers with thorny stems. Press them too closely and the thorns get under your skin. You had best watch out for Ephryne. It is the general custom for a rescued maid to wed her champion. And if Ephryne gets that idea in her head, you might have trouble getting it out. Unless, of course, the idea suited you. Women are wily when they want anything. Ask Python about women. He knows. Did you ever hear the yarn about Athene and Arachne—"

It was the sort of tale men swap over wine cups, and Hephaestus told it well. Peter countered with a milder one. It was new to the smith and he laughed until tears ran down his leathery cheeks.

"Tell me more, Peter. One seldom hears a fresh one nowadays. Have some more wine. Here is a new sort."

Hephaestus poured out the fresh supply, sampled it and made a wry face.

"*Faugh*, it has soured! It's the

heat. But if I keep it chilled it is too flat."

"It hasn't got much of a kick to it," Peter agreed. For a moment Hephaestus stared at him, then he caught the pith of the phrase.

"No kick? Ha, that's a good one, Peter! The nectar that I gave Cheiron, how it made *him* snort and kick!"

"Have you cold water here?" asked Peter.

"A rare spring of it. Not all the fires of Aetna can warm it. You would think it came straight from the snows of Olympus. I have little use for it, save to quench my hot metal. Why?"

"We have liquor in my country," Peter said, "that may be made from wine, and that has lots of kick. It is not nectar, of course, but it has spirit. We call it spirits."

The sour wine had fermented. It would be easy to make grape brandy out of it. The process was simple. Hephaestus could easily contrive a pot still and a coil.

"How do you make it, Peter? I could use some 'spirits,' as you style it. I dare not use nectar while I work in the smithy. I have tried it, and it won't work."

Peter made sketches, described the method. "It should be a slow heat, Hephaestus. The fumes rise through the coil like vapor. And the cold water through which the coil runs condenses this vapor, so that it drips from the end of the coil into another container—and there you are!"

He was finding it hard to keep awake. His mouth opened in mighty yawns, while his eyelids drooped.

"You are tired out, lad. You shall go to sleep. I will have your shoes ready for you before you awaken. And also I shall set up this machine for making spirits. Is there a name for it?"

"A still," yawned Peter. "Sometimes a pot still."

"Come with me, Peter. You shall not be disturbed."

Hephaestus showed him to a small cavern where soft rugs were strewn thick upon the floor, thrust a burning torch of cedar into an iron ring in the wall.

"I will bring you a nightcup, Peter. Then let Morpheus woo thee. You are a brave lad. If I had a son of my own—"

The divine smith sighed, limped away. Peter was half asleep when he returned.

"This is my own brand of nepenthe, Peter, diluted with wine. You'll awaken a new man."

The liquor was spiced with herbs, and pungent. Peter felt a delicious easement stealing over him. He did not see Hephaestus leave. Once he heard, as in a dream, the clang of metals, the shouting of the firemaster. Then real dreams came to him, in which Ephryne turned out to be Calixta. There was a wedding on Olympus, with Pan playing the march to the tune of "The Kerry Dance." Then oblivion.

PETER AWAKENED with a sense of having slept a week, completely rested and vigorous, with a tremendous appetite. At first he did not realize where he was. He felt for his cigarette case—and remembered. Fitful light was playing on the walls of his rock chamber; no noise came from the smithy.

Then Hephaestus entered.

"The shoes are done, lad. My fools spoiled many, but I made them reforge them. Now they can furnish Cheiron with all he needs. And we have rigged the bellows. It works like a spell. You shall breakfast with me, Peter, and then be on your way. The galley has returned."

"So soon?"

"Time passes when you take nepenthe, Peter. Let us eat. And you shall try some of the spirits I have made. I am much beholden to you, Peter. Wait till I introduce this stuff to Olympus!"

The stuff had the wallop of a sledge hammer, combined with the kick of a mule. It seemed to flay the membrane off Peter's throat and sear the lining from his stomach. It needed distilling two or three times more for mortal use, but Hephaestus downed it as if asbestos-lined.

"Do you want some to take along, Peter? Spirits is a good word for it; surely it is ardent enough to put a new soul into any mortal."

Peter duly thanked his host, said he did not see how he could carry it.

"That is easily solved. I will make

"Return?" said Zeus. "Go back to the world? Granted! Let him return!"

thee a flask of metal, with my own hands."

There was no sign of the Cyclopes, the dead guard had been removed. Peter's bellows had been rigged, and Hephaestus was as pleased with it as a child with a new toy. Again Peter marveled at his skill as he made a flask, flat and not too heavy, cooled it, fitted it with a twisted plug to a threaded neck, proud of his work.

He filled it with the grape brandy.

"You will find the shoes, nails, hammer and rasp at the end of the defile, Peter. The sailors can carry them to the galley. And I have sent a messenger to Aeolus. You will have fair weather. Give my regards to Pan. He is a mischievous person but a good friend. I doubt if he is as successful with the women as he makes himself out to be. But those matters pall, Peter, when one is immortal. My respects to Hera, my mother, if she condescends to notice you. 'Ware Ephryne! You see, she may have some notion that her fair fame has been tarnished because you have escorted her—"

"She needn't worry about that," Peter answered. "I haven't got much use for women. Treat them nicely and they think they own you—"

"True, all too true. But she might have use for *you*, redhead. And they use tricks like that when they want to secure a mate. Well, go your way. You will always be welcome here. I may see you later, on Olympus. Zeus is always wanting new thunderbolts. I have a new pattern I want to try out. Hail and farewell!"

His grip almost crushed Peter's hand. Then he patted him on the shoulder, stood watching as Peter made his way up the ramp, the flask of spirits in his hip pocket.

Peter went with swinging stride, imbued with vitality. He had established his self-confidence. He had handled the centaurs, got by Scylla, Charybdis and the Cyclopes. He had made a friend of crusty Hephaestus. And he had dodged Amphitrite. Now for the Python.

Before he reached the entry to the rift he heard, sounding distantly, the clamor of the laboring Cyclopes, set again to their tasks, the bellowing of Hephaestus.

In the rift the air was sulphurous, and he was glad when he emerged into the open, filled his lungs with ozone, saw the bright sea sparkling below. The shoes and tools were piled as promised. Peter went on down to where the galley was beached, and Tiphys greeted him as one returning from the dead.

"A Cyclops waded out to us and drew us ashore," he said. "There were others on the strand, and we thought we were lost. But, though they looked hungrily at us, they did not harm us. They said . . . they said you were a guest of Hephaestus."

"I visited him while he made some trinkets for me," said Peter carelessly, watching the awe in their faces. That would offset the fact that his shadow was sharp upon the sand. "Let us fetch them and set forth. There will be a fair wind."

There was not only fair wind but favoring current. With these and the oars they made rapid progress. Peter figured they averaged better than thirteen knots.

Pan, as Hephaestus predicted, was on the shore, stretched out between two rocks, softly piping. Peter whistled the first bars of "The Kerry Dance" and saw him get up, come to meet him.

He looked a bit weary but his greeting was hearty.

"You've made it, Peter. I knew you would. Your friend Pyloetius is hanging around somewhere. You had better see him and send him back for some of his playmates to bring sacks and transport the footwear. Then you can tell me of your adventures.

"He will report your meeting me to Cheiron, of course, and he may have seen me go into the temple to meet you, watched you leave. It will not matter as long as you got what Cheiron wants. Er—use your own judgment, Peter—but it might be as well not to disabuse his mind of the idea that it was his scroll to Amphitrite that pulled the trick."

Peter nodded his assent. The sailors were unloading the shoes. Hephaestus had been better than his word. There were five hundred of them in assorted sizes, together with a sack of nails.

"How is she?" asked Peter of Pan.

"Who? Amphitrite?"

"Yes. Should I thank her?"

"I wouldn't. I left her asleep. We had a lot to talk about. She wanted all the gossip, some of which I made up to please her. And she had a deep dish of it to serve out herself. She talked me deaf, dumb and almost blind. You must not be offended, but I think she has forgotten all about you. It was your red hair that fascinated her. I'm sleepy myself. I'll wait here while you see Pyloetius. Then I shan't see you again until you're through with Python. If you want me then, play the air of Syrinx."

Dolon stamped upon the rock with his new shoes. It was flint and Dolon chuckled as he saw sparks.

"I feel a little clumsy," he said, "but doubtless I shall get used to them. They will save my hoofs."

"And mine," said Atocles, his black hide lustrous. "Pick out a light pair for me, please. I am next. Be sure they are a good fit, and try not to hurt me."

For one long out of practice, Peter felt he had made a good job. Cheiron stood by, benignly stroking his beard.

"Come and eat, Petros," he said. "You have done well. After the meal I will tell you where to find Python. I had to make some inquiries."

When they had finished, they sat at the mouth of Cheiron's cave while the sunset died. It was a smoldering display, with streaks of dull crimson dying slowly amid masses of dark-purple vapor. A fitting background, Peter thought, for the tale that Cheiron told, giving him directions.

"Python lies coiled within a cone-shaped, solitary mount. It once spouted flame and rock, but that was long ago. In it, they say, is a passage that leads by winding ways down to Hades. All about it lies a thick forest. You may know when you approach it by the lowing of the cattle Python pens there to feed him.

"He comes out only at night, in dread of Athene. Not being sure when Apollo may return. From his mouth he rolls the great jewel and by its light selects three beeves. He crushes them in his coils, and when they are pulp he smears them with saliva. Then he draws himself upon a carcass, as one draws on a glove, moving his jaws forward and back, right and left, with his teeth sunk in the mass. Are you cold, Petros?"

"It did seem to be getting a bit chilly. The wind is sharp."

"Have some more wine, Petros. When he has them all in his belly he slides sluggishly back to his cave and

sleeps. Should you find him thus, it might be a good time to get the jewel and release the maiden. Without the jewel he is powerless, for he has lived so long in the dark that he is almost blind, and his eyes are partly filmed with horn.

"But his scent is as keen as his hearing. And he is the craftiest of all creatures. Beware, Petros, lest he pretend friendship, and you get too close, so that he may fling a coil about you. You would be but a gobbet to him, but perhaps a savory one."

"A savory gobbet." Cheiron had much too fertile a vocabulary, Peter thought.

"My advice would be not to go, Petros. If Zeus slew thee, it would be a swifter death—and a more pleasant one."

"Thanks, Cheiron," said Peter, not without sarcasm. "I'll think it over."

He did not want to think it over too much. Now he was upon the final threshold of his task, he felt a definite sense of opposition, the gathering of invisible powers that might be leagued against him. Zeus was pitiless. If his playthings failed, the fault and the penalty were theirs.

But he was going. Python could not be much worse than Scylla, and he had got by that too handy hag. It was on the knees of the gods.

He conjured up all that he knew about serpents, heard or read, and with the stress of the situation a memory stirred in his subconscious, not yet formed but shaping.

"I will have Pyloetius bear you within sight of the mount," Cheiron was saying. "He did not like the idea, but I have laid my commands upon him. And he has a high opinion of you, Petros. So have I. When do you want to start?"

The sooner it was over the better, Peter thought. "Early tomor-

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row, Cheiron. After I have shod Pyloetius."

"Good. Then you will get a good night's sleep before the journey."

Peter doubted it, but to his astonishment he slept soundly until dawn.

PYLOETIUS proceeded in an easy canter. He had got used to the feel of his shoes, and was now proud of them. But he was nervous and sweating when he halted to point out to Peter the lone cone of the mount, rearing from a dark forest.

"I will take you to the trees," he said, "but no farther, even though Cheiron has me slain. I am deadly afraid of snakes. It runs in my blood."

"I don't fancy them as pets, myself, Pyloetius. I don't blame you. You have borne me well, and I will give you a gift, for remembrance."

Peter produced his pocket lighter, showed the centaur how to manipulate it. Pyloetius took it with profound thanks, with a mingling of awe and delight.

Having no pockets, he kept it close clasped in one hand. "I hope Cheiron will not want this," he said.

"Don't show it to him, then, Pyloetius."

They went on to the edge of the forest. The wind blew toward them with the clean, pungent scent of resin and fir foliage. There came also the faint lowing of cattle. Peter wondered if Python were selecting a meal. Then he reflected that it was too light for that.

They shook hands at parting, man and centaur, and Peter watched as Pyloetius picked up speed, galloping his best to reach a safer zone.

Cheiron had ordered a lunch put up for him. It included a small jug of wine. Peter ate his lunch slowly, wondering if it would be his last meal. He preferred to die, if he had to, on a full stomach. He ate and drank slowly, his back against the

bole of one of the great fir trees, and longed more than ever for a cigarette.

Thinking and longing did not work with tobacco, he had found out. Pan's cantrips were useless except with affairs natural to the country. The gods had not adopted the solace of smoking, and its unknown, foreign materials could not be materialized.

No birds sang in the deep wood. Nothing stirred in its thickets. An intense silence reigned. The cattle were quiet.

Peter began to work on the notion that had come into his mind. He took out his whistle and practiced certain simple melodies. At last he put it away and entered the forest.

He found a path over which he figured the sacrificial cattle were driven. They were votive offerings to Python. He could no longer see the mount for the trees. No sunshine came through their dense foliage.

At length the corral came into view. It was stoutly built and contained about twoscore of steers that rolled their eyes at him as he passed.

There was a great trough of water, brimming over, fed from some spring that welled in at the bottom. Peter's throat was dry and he drank deeply.

Now he saw another trail, a strange one. It looked as if some mammoth cable had been dragged through the deep drift of fallen fir needles and cones.

A living cable. By this eerie path Python crawled to select his beeves, dragged back his distended length to his retreat.

Peter followed it. He had to keep going. If he once halted, he knew, he would not go on again, for all of Zeus and his thunderbolts. He tried a low whistle, but his lips were parched. He made himself a phrase to which he kept step, repeating it over and over:

"You never are licked till you quit.
You never are licked till you quit.
You never are licked—"

Now the still air held a reek of musk that gradually grew stronger, more offensive. The forest was shadowless, and so was Peter. But the great serpent was, in a sense, the father of all mankind. No doubt it was Python who had tempted Eve. He could smell out a human mortal, might now know that Peter was approaching.

The memory of Cheiron's description of Python licking his pulped victims, licking them with a forked tongue, smearing them with saliva so they would go down easier, became suddenly visualized, and he shut it off. He took out his whistle, wetted his lips with the last of the wine, piped himself along to the tune of the marines:

"From the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli—"

It was a brave tune and it heartened him, marching like an automaton, with the musky reek in his nostrils. Let Python hear him. If Python were awake he would be expecting him. Peter finished the march and started another. It somehow seemed appropriate, the march of the British grenadiers:

"Of Hector and Lysander, and other names like these—
Some talk of Alexander, and some of Hercules."

Heracles was the more correct. Heracles, who had strangled serpents in his cradle. Serpents sent by Hera to destroy him, Peter remembered. He wished Heracles was along. This was a tough assignment. Peter did not feel scared, but

he was definitely afraid he might not be coming back.

Or Pan. But it had become plain to him, before this, that it was expected of him to tackle the real difficulties of his task alone. Pan had gone as far as he dared to help him.

PETER WAS GETTING a bit fed up with caves. Whether this encounter was to be his finish or not, he preferred to meet it in the open. Now that he was up against the final cast of the dice of destiny, he no longer felt nervous. He had charged himself with confidence, and a dynamo of resolve and effort was purring away within him. He had accepted the challenge, and his spirit met the issue with the impetus of a thoroughbred, stirred and elated by the presence of odds.

For all that, he liked the cave business less and less as he advanced along the winding tunnel, with its ever-increasing musky stench. This was different from Cheiron's retreat or the subvolcanic approaches to the smithy of Hephaestus.

It was crudely circular, and the interior almost entirely smooth, glazed by vitreous deposit left by the flow of the molten tide that had issued through the vent.

The intermittent flashes of Peter's torch revealed the glaze to be darkly iridescent, like the matrix of black opals, with hidden gleams of red and green that glowed with a weird beauty.

It sloped gently upward in long curves. The air was sluggish, heavy with the reptilian odor, sometimes curiously misty, then radiantly clear.

Presently Peter became conscious of a hissing sound that slowly increased in volume. It was like the escape of steam, but Peter believed it to be the voice of Python, resentful of an intruder.

It was time, he thought, to test the notion that had come to him. Some serpents could be charmed by music, were susceptible to its vibrations. Snake charmers could control hooded cobras, put them in a trance.

It was one thing to tame a cobra; it might be quite another to affect such a monster as Python. At the zoo they had found boas responsive to organ tones, but they were worms beside this primordial creature that, somewhere ahead of him, stretched its scaly fathoms.

He should have asked Pan about it, but the notion had come too recently. He brought the beam of his torch to a minimum, tucked it under one arm, and set his pipe between his lips, fingers on the sound holes. He had brought along the leather bag in which he had carried his luncheon. He had a definite purpose for it, if he got the chance to use it.

Peter was no composer; he had to choose tunes he could manage as an amateur. He must attract Python's attention, distract it from anger. A lively air at first, he thought, then soothing ones—lullabies might be best.

His pulses kept rhythm to the lilt of "The Girl I Left Behind Me," then "Tipperary." The act of playing held him to his own purpose as he marched, the bright bead of his light slipping over the curves of the tunnel. The hissing died down. The effluvium of musk lessened, as if Python had been emitting it in an anger now subdued.

So Peter hoped, and kept on piping.

Now he heard a rasping, rustling noise. It was like the sound of heavy chains dragged over a grid. It might be Python stretching his convolutions—it might be Python approaching.

The sibilance had ceased entirely.

He rounded a curve. The ray hit first one, then another, disk of light, throbbing orange with shifting spots of blue, the color of burning alcohol. It was infinitely baleful, abhorrent, that steady, hypnotic glare, intense with sinful wisdom. It was a hot gaze, seen like furnace fire through plates of isinglass or horn.

Had the enormous eyes been unfilmed, Peter felt they might have shriveled the soul within him. But long living in the dark had bleared them with a cataract growth that dimmed their malignance.

They hung in the air like great, murky lamps, suggesting brilliant lights back of dirty lenses.

PETER TUCKED his whistle away in his belt, adjusted the lens of his torch to full focus. If he could not dazzle the monster, as he had the Cyclops, he could prevent it from seeing him, back of the cone of illumination.

And now he saw the flattened head, enormous, the gaping jaws wide apart, set with rows of back-hooked teeth, the maw that could engulf the carcass of an ox. A pinkish-yellow tongue, forked and vibrant. Back of that, the sinewy column of the enormous neck, and hinted coil after coil, trailing into darkness.

The orbs were unblinking. Slowly they lowered—lowered until the ophidian head touched the floor, while a slow rustling proclaimed the adjustment of its body.

Peter gaped and gasped as an intense roseate light came from Python's gullet. It moved forward, rolling between the sharklike but elongated teeth, over the bony plates of the lower jaw, like some will-o'-the-wisp of Hades.

Python was ejecting his magic lantern, the great jewel Hera coveted. The tongue rolled it forward,

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but it seemed to move of itself, automatically. The color was that of an unflawed pigeon's-blood ruby, a globe haloed by the mystical luminosity within it. It was almost as large as Peter's head, its exact size and shape hard to determine because of the aura.

Peter's electric ray was blanched by it. It filled a great space with its roseate radiance, softly intense, light without warmth but suggesting it. It was not so brilliant as diffusive—all-revealing.

It rolled a short way from the jaws that closed behind it, the jaws of some legendary dragon beast, and lay like a Promethean spark, while Peter switched off his futile torch.

Then Python spoke.

It was a voice infinitely wise and infinitely weary, like the voice of Satan. Peter heard its echoes dying away behind him in the cavern's tube.

"Oh, ho, a mortal! I smell your blood! Now, by the heads of Cerberus, what brings you here? What courage sustains you to venture into my retreat?"

Peter found his voice. Python was yawning. He was bored rather than menacing, mildly intrigued for the moment, rather than malignant.

"I come seeking knowledge, O mighty Python!"

"Seek it at Delphi, mortal, or has

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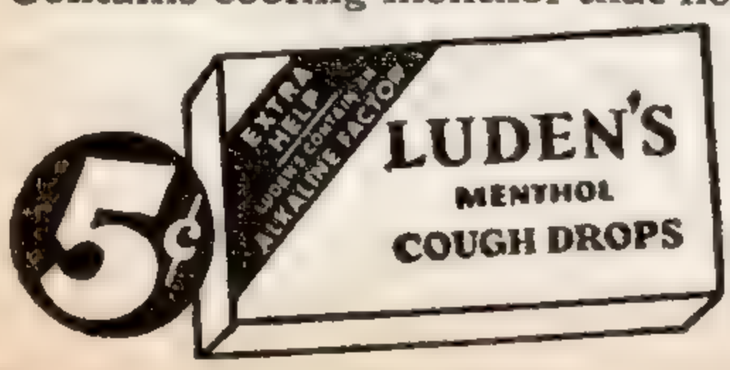

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the sibyl forsaken the shrine, since I no longer guard the oracles?"

"Mortal though I am, I have enough of wisdom to desire more from its fount, O Python!"

Python yawned again. He seemed amused at Peter's temerity, though it might be only in cat-and-mouse fashion. If he were asked what questions he wanted solved, Peter would be in a quandary. He had a vague idea of asking Python just what fruit it was that Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge. He might not be able to jolly Python as he had jollied Hephaestus.

But he was not put to it.

"I do not feel like answering questions, mortal. My change is upon me. I would not be disturbed. I have suffered your approach only because of the dulcet notes I heard. At first I thought it was Pan. Music is at once my bane and my delight. Surely Pan taught thee, mortal? I would hear thee play again."

"Pan is a good friend of mine," Peter said.

There was never any harm in mentioning the name of an influential and important personage.

PETER wondered what Python meant by his "change." Obediently he began to play the airs he had selected for this ordeal. The head of Python lifted, swayed gently to and fro. His baleful eyes began to close. Once his forked tongue slipped out between the horny lips and licked delicately over his nostrils while Peter fluted:

"Go to sleep, my li'l' pickaninny,
Underneath the silvery, southern moon,
Hushaby, rockaby, Mammy's li'l' baby,
Mammy's li'l' Alabama coon."

It seemed childish, infantile, getting the King of Serpents to rock himself to sleep with simple lullabies. It was the suggestion of the drowsy rhythm that held the sleep-inducing power—and it was working.

It was almost ridiculous to see Python yawn, nod, yawn again, save that this was all in deadly earnest. The mystic jewel lay in front of Peter—somewhere in the vastness beyond was Ephryne.

This was simple stuff, but it was magic—universal magic, a gift of the gods to man as great as fire.

"Go to sleep my ba-a-by, my ba-a-by, my ba-a-by—"

Then:

"Baby's boat's a silver moon, sailing in the sky—"

Python's head lowered once more; it rested on the floor, eyes closed. Python had eyelids like a man.

Peter sounded "Taps." He played it with feeling, compellingly.

"Go to sleep! Go to sleep!"

Its spell lay upon the gigantic serpent. As Peter softly fingered the last phrase—

"All is well!"

—he saw that his magic had prevailed. Python might have been a stuffed exhibit, without sign of breathing, of life.

How long that hypnosis might last Peter could not guess. He hoped it had only accentuated the drowsiness that had already possessed Python, something, perhaps, to do with the "change" that was upon him.

Silently, swiftly, Peter opened his leather sack and rolled the glowing gem into it, drawing tight the strings. It was not a heavy burden, and he took it with him as he switched on his torch and stepped lightly along the relaxed length of Python.

He had an idea that Python was not well, though it might have been

age that robbed his skin of all gloss, made the scales look dead. He wasted little speculation on that as he stepped off, fathom after fathom, and at last passed the slowly switching taper of Python's tail, the only suggestion of vitality in the whole torpid trunk.

The tunnel grew smaller, still mounting. It seemed to extend into the very womb of the mount. This might even be the regular byway to Hades. By now he had left the stink of musk behind. The air was purer and in motion.

Then an opening appeared, branching off like horizontal wells of mystery.

Where to find Ephryne? How to find Ephryne?

He had the gem, if he could get out with it. The task was better than half done. Zeus wanted the jewel. But he had included the request of Leto, grandmother of Ephryne. And Leto, Peter knew, had been the first consort of Zeus, though Hera had managed to supersede her. She might still be the favorite wife, for old time's sake, if Zeus had a favorite.

Peter doubted that. The domestic virtues seemed no part of Olympian culture. It must be a bit wearying, he thought, to see the same face—or faces—across the matutinal nectar and ambrosia for eternity.

And Zeus would not sanction a task half performed.

PETER BEGAN to pipe again, gave that up to call upon the name of the daughter of Artemis. He could not hunt her down all these Stygian corridors. His electric torch was beginning to wane. The batteries were depleting. They would not last much longer.

True, he had the roseate jewel, but its approaching light might only terrify the captive maiden. He wondered how Python held her prisoner. If chained to a rock, like Andromeda, Peter would prove a futile Perseus. The file Hephaestus had given him, which he had left with Cheiron, might come in handy—if he had it.

And Python's "change" worried him. When it came, what would it portend? What would happen when Python found his magic light was gone? With his marvelous olfactory sense, would he not come gliding and hissing on the trail of mortal blood, Peter impotently fleeing—

Peter flashed his paling torch into one of the side chambers and saw what seemed to be a girl's form, prone on a narrow shelf. But it was only a husk of the elusive maid, a diaphanous garment flung aside. He hurried on.

Singing, above him, close at hand. He halted, listening.

"When comes he, my hero,
To carry me hence?
Away from this creature
So scaly of feature,
When comes he, and whence?"

It might be lyric verse, he thought, but as poetry it was definitely bad. And the voice, while it had its sweetness, failed to keep on key. The effect was appealing but hardly sirenic.

"Artemis, my mother,
Give ear to my plea,
Oh, hast Thou forgotten,
Thy babe-god-begotten?
Have pity on me."

It was Ephryne, all right, a bit euphemistic about her other parent—

"Arouse, my deliverer,
Where'er he may dwell,
O, send him here fleetly,
That he may completely
Break Python's foul spell.

"O, haste Thee, my hero,
To greet Thee I pine,
And all of my beauty
Shall yield you sweet duty
And Thou shalt be mine."

To Peter it was a pitiful plaint, in more ways than one. He was not enthusiastic about the implication of the last stanza. Ephryne might be merely indulging in poetic license, but it looked like still another complication looming ahead. When a goddess was grateful to a mortal, and wished to bestow favors, the affair was apt to be chancy. To refuse might bring on dire consequences. And if the goddess grew tired, or the mortal failed to live up to her divine expectations, trouble was right around the corner, and more apt to turn it than prosperity.

There was no help for it. He went on a little way, let his ray travel ahead to where the tunnel widened and heightened. The singing stopped. He called her name:

"Ephryne!"

He heard a gasp, caught a glimpse of a head, running over with golden curls that were a bit tousled, peering down from a ledge.

"Who art thou? Did Artemis send thee?"

"It was Leto, through Zeus. Come on down. We've got to get out of here."

"I can't. Python has taken away all my clothes. Have you slain Python? Perhaps, if you extinguished thy lamp—"

"I have charmed Python to sleep, Ephryne." That might be stretching it a bit, but Peter felt he was justified. "I know where your clothes are. I will fetch them. There's no time to lose. I can't tell how long my spell will last."

"Oh, hurry, hurry! But first—turn thy light upon thyself."

That was fair enough, Peter thought, and did so. He heard another gasp.

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"Ah, now I know you are a favored son of the gods. I adore your hair. It is divine! It burns like an altar flame."

"I am not divine, Ephryne"—Peter almost said "sister" in his embarrassment. "I am but a mortal, though dispatched by Zeus to rescue you."

"A mortal! Oh! But Zeus shall make you immortal. Leto shall ask it of him. It shall be a part of thy meed. And I—"

"I've got to go," said Peter. "I'll be back in a jiffy."

He sped away. *Not if I know it,* he promised himself. *Immortality is OUT.*

He found the clothing, laid it below the ledge.

"I'll leave them here while you dress," he said. "Call me when you're ready."

The goddess giggled. "You're nice," she said. "Tell me your name." She had dropped the unfamiliar "thee" and "thou."

"It's Peter. But hurry."

"I like it. Do you like my name, Peter? Now go away—not too far. I don't think I ever want you to go far away, Peter, now you have found me."

SHE MIGHT turn out to be another Amphitrite, less forward, since Amphitrite was married. *I've got to get hold of Pan, toute suite,* thought Peter.

"Here I am, Peter. Didn't I dress quickly?" A soft hand slipped into his. She took the torch away from him and turned it on herself. It was no wonder it had taken her a short time to dress, Peter thought. The costume was briefly provocative. The blue eyes were at once appealing and mischievous. Ephryne was shapely but a little on the robust side—voluptuous might be a nicer word.

"Am I not beautiful, Peter?"

"Too beautiful for mortal eyes."

"Oh, Peter, you do say the sweetest things. But we shall arrange all that. Put your arm about me, Peter. I shall feel safer, and we can go more swiftly."

You bet your sweet life we can! It was not only the urgency of getting out of the mount, out of the forest, that urged Peter on. Ephryne had possessive ways. She seemed to think she owned him already.

"What's in the sack, Peter?"

"Python's jewel."

"His je— Peter, you are marvelous. Let me look at it."

"Not now."

"Just once."

"No!"

"I command thee, mortal."

"I tell you there's no time. Come on."

"So masterful," he heard her sigh.

And then he heard the sibilant hiss of Python, awakening, missing his treasure.

Ephryne clung to him, shuddering. Peter could not blame her for that. She kept timidly behind him as they advanced, and Peter risked using his feebling torch.

It showed the powerful body of Python humping in convulsive undulations, seeming to constrict every muscle and then violently relax. It was not for the production of motion. It seemed rather as if the mighty snake was stricken with terrific pains that racked it from lips to tail tip.

Python writhed from side to side, went through all the antics reported by discoverers of sea serpents, as illustrated by imaginative artists. It might, Peter fancied, be some sort of ritual, a frenetic dance for which he was practicing, keeping himself limber against the time when he could square things with Apollo and return to his job as guardian of the shrine of the sibyl at Delphi.

But Python had spoken of a "change"—and this must be it.

The hissing grew louder, like the escape of steam from a cylinder that was overcharged. In pain or not, it was clear that Python was making prodigious efforts, threatening to tie his length in knots.

They dared not try to pass him in the narrow way as he flung himself from side to side.

The flash torch was fast fading out. To use the jewel would surely direct Python's attention and wrath upon them.

Suddenly Python lay flat, at full length, exhausted and quivering, as if gathering strength for the next contortion.

And Peter saw what it was all about.

The dull skin, with the dead-looking scales, had split down a part of his back, where a snake's shoulders would be, when snakes had shoulders.

The rent revealed a new and lustrous armor, burnished and metallic.

Python was shedding his skin. Having a hard time to do it. But, once started, the rest should be easy. And, with the shedding, his blindness might disappear. That was snake history. There was indeed no time to lose.

This time it was Peter who grasped his companion by the hand and urged her along. As they passed Python's head it jerked from side to side, but Peter did not think he could see, smell or hear while the change was on. He had no true knowledge of herpetology, but he had some hazy ideas about what went on at such times. Those ideas included the statement that snakes were most vicious then, lashing out blindly.

They tiptoed past, in safety, as the convulsions began again. They left Python writhing violently, intent

upon his own condition as they fled into the forest, down his trail, past the cattle corral, without stopping.

Nor did they halt until they got out of the trees. Peter was winded, but he saw that the daughter of Artemis, albeit plumpish, was not distressed. That, he supposed, might be an attribute of the gods. She cuddled up to him.

"That was a fearful spell you set upon Python, Peter. Will he die?"

"Not this trip, Ephryne." If she thought he had made Python's skin split up that way, let her do so.

"Now let me see the jewel, Peter."

PETER TOOK it out of the bag. Dusk was coming on, but the radiant glory of the mystic gem banished it. A rosy glory, the light that never was on land or sea, filled the world, limned the tall tree trunks and the dark foliage, made Ephryne look like Aurora herself.

She could barely hold its bulk in her two hands.

"Hera will use it as a scepter," she sighed. Peter took it away from her. He saw a covetous and calculating look come into her eyes, something that needed nipping in the bud. Something that gave him additional insight into the nature of Ephryne. Goddess she might be, but she was a greedy brat, probably spoiled. What she wanted she reached for.

The look became petulant as Peter put away the jewel from sight. Some of it returned as she looked at Peter. But it was petting now instead of pettish. He remembered Pan's promise to show up, if wanted, upon signal.

"Shall I show you how I laid the spell upon Python?" Peter said guilefully.

"I should love it, Peter."

He took his whistle and played "The Kerry Dance." Played it twice. Ephryne listened with her head on one side, her lips pursed. In the twilight she looked very charming. There was a certain glamour about her, a certain—

Peter heard a familiar, welcome chuckle. Then Pan leaped out of the forest, landed lightly, stood there quizzically regarding them.

Ephryne pouted. "What is *he* doing here, the smelly thing! Get him to go away, Peter."

"I couldn't do that. If it were not for him, we should not be here."

Ephryne made a sour face and Pan scratched his ribs.

"I see you won out, Peter," Pan said. "I knew you would."

"He is wonderful," Ephryne put in. "I am going to get Leto to ask Zeus to make him immortal. Then he shall wed with me."

Pan winked at Peter in the growing gloom. "How did you manage Python?" he asked.

Peter told him briefly and Pan laughed until he had to sit down to finish it. Then he got serious.

"If he sheds his skin, and with it his blindness," he said, "it might not be too healthy for you round here, while you are still mortal. You were certainly in luck. Python renews his skin only once in a hundred earth-years. He may not stay in hiding any longer and, eyes or no eyes, he is not going to take the loss of that jewel lightly. Nor, of course, the loss of Ephryne, who was his hostage. I think we had better be on our way."

There broke out a sudden bellowing of cattle back in the forest. They knew what that meant. Python was coming, swift in his new armor.

It was almost dark, the stars pricking through.

"I doubt if his night eyes are much better than ours," said Pan. "He'll

"He's a friend, sweet Dryad," Pan explained hastily. "Ephryne's mother is looking for him—and I thought he'd be safer hidden in your tree—"

rely upon scent. I brought these with me, in case. Break out the cloves and rub your feet with them. On your shoes, Peter, well up. You, too, fair virgin, unless you want Python to infold you."

Peter took the small bulbs Pan offered him. They looked like garlic, smelled like garlic—they *were* garlic. Ephryne sniffed disdainfully.

"I will not defile myself with this stuff," she said. "Python may not harm the daughter of Artemis! He would not dare to try."

"I'm not so sure about that," said Peter. "And Python's own smell is not that of asphodels."

She hesitated. Peter was already rubbing his shoes. They were field boots, and he smeared the juice of the bulbs high to his knees. The pungent scent of the oil enveloped them.

He knew that garlic would foil

bloodhounds, and that it was supposed to have magic virtues over ghouls and werewolves, a virtue that probably lay wholly in its power to surmount human odor.

THE BELLOWING of the cattle redoubled. There was a crashing sound, and then bullocks came tearing through the trees, snorting in terror. They had broken down their corral. Now they heard the hiss of Python.

"I smell of it already," cried Ephryne, her voice tremulous. "Help me put on this dreadful stuff, Peter."

Python was coming, winding through the wood. The hissing ceased. He was moving silently.

"Come," Pan said imperatively. "Take her other hand, Peter."

That was more to force her movement than needed assistance, Peter realized. She went as a daughter of Artemis should, like a deer. Pan like a mountain goat. Peter was hard put to it to keep pace with them. Pan guided them as they fled through the darkness, away from the bolting steers.

Peter glanced back and thought he saw the gliding length of Python, crest erect, emerging from the trees. Then they plunged, bounding, into a dell, splashed through a knee-deep stream, sought covert in a thicket of the sacred laurel. Peter was panting like a blown runner after the final sprint. Ephryne was far from winded.

Pan breathed easily. "We are safe here," he said. "I'll scout when the moon rises. All this has happened at an opportune time, Peter. Zeus has been playing truant again, and Hera's pet, Iris, has been, as usual, spying and carrying tales. The jewel will be a welcome diversion. Presently I will anoint you with ambrosia, Peter, and then we can speed to Olympus. I could hardly have done it in time back there, not to mention the presence of the lady."

"You two could have outstripped Python," said Peter, "but you stayed with me."

"Didst think I would have left you, lad?" Pan's voice was strong with affection. He slid a hairy, muscular arm about Peter's shoulder.

"Or that I would, Peter, my rescuer? I shall never leave you, Peter, never. We shall be together, when we are wedded, night and day—for always."

Peter thought, *The heck you will!* and heard Pan's chuckle. He had forgotten Pan could read his thoughts. To his relief, Ephryne did not seem to notice anything.

The moon lofted and Pan stood up. "I shall not be gone long," he said.

Peter knew Pan caught his silent plea to hurry.

Ephryne put her soft arms about him, pressed her cheek to his. "You must promise me, Peter, when Zeus has granted my boon, and we are truly *one*, not to have anything more to do with that vulgar person. Kiss me, Peter."

Peter almost groaned aloud. He had known this was coming. And he again remembered Calixta.

He was aware that his response was pretty tepid, would probably be considered amateur by the average girl who made an advance. As for her offering, he decided that the kiss of an ardent and grateful young goddess was not to be entirely despised. But he was not going to get hooked, to find himself pledged to matrimony, Olympian or otherwise.

She looked at him curiously.

"Do mortals kiss, Peter?" she asked. "You do not seem to know much about it. I shall have to teach you."

"Listen," Peter stalled. "Was that Python hissing?"

It was not, but it distracted her mind, or her lips. She began to tell Peter all about herself; she prattled and babbled until, to his infinite relief, Pan came back.

"Python is headed for the sea," he said. "I saw him going, rippling himself like a wave, his new skin shining. But he'll find out his mistake and it's time we were going. If you'll take a walk, Ephryne, I'll give Peter his rub."

She rose with a pout and a shrug. "I'll give you your rubs, Peter, after we are wed. I just love to have my back rubbed."

Pan started to chuckle, and she gave him a look that might have turned him to stone, had she the power.

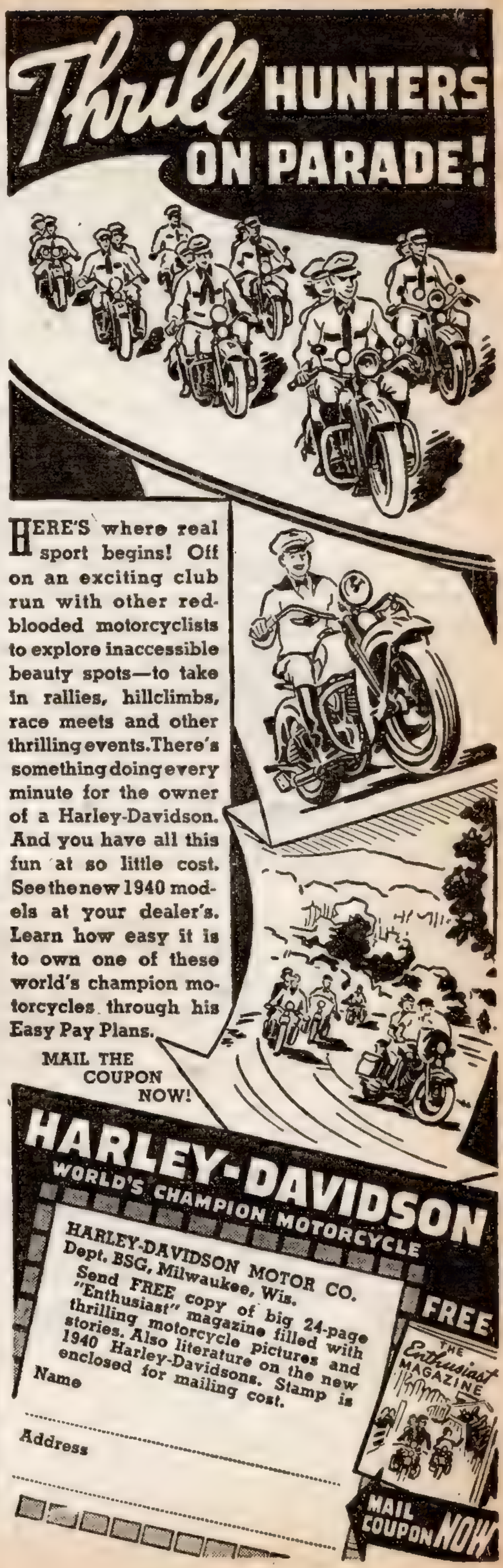
VIII.

Olympus was effulgent. Radiance seemed to issue from within the mountain to blend with the sunshine pouring from a cloudless sky. A gentle zephyr carried rare essence of ambrosia and lightly caressed the trees, the grasses, the flowers and verdure.

Zeus and his court were assembled. Cupbearers passed among them, and Hephaestus himself was there, hobbling about and superintending the libations.

The immortals seemed happy, but Peter fancied they were putting on a show that had been played too often to retain much spontaneity. His arrival with Ephryne and the jewel had made a stir. The gem seemed the more important for the time.

Ephryne was with Artemis and Leto, talking, chattering. Peter was glad to be rid of her, for the time, at least. She had talked at full length about the vows they would plight, that Zeus would solemnize and sanctify, his own immortaliza-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tion, the elaborate ceremony that would plight them to each other—"for ever-and-ever-and-ever, Peter darling."

Apollo would give away the bride. The Muses and the Graces would be bridesmaids. All the notables of Olympus would be there. "Oh, Peter, just *think* of it!"

He did think of it. He was thinking of it now as he stood with Pan on a lower terrace, where the gods lounged, regarding him, awaiting the report of the red-headed mortal who had succeeded in the task set him by Zeus. It was rumored that he was to be immortalized, and that he would wed Ephryne, whom he had rescued from Python—as was right and fitting.

It was also rumored that this redhead had an amusing tale of adventure to tell, a second Odyssey.

He walked out on the sward that lay like a thick green carpet before the throne of Zeus and below it. Pan was beside him. There was a special excitement still going on among the consorts of Zeus, Metis, Themis, Eurynome, Demeter, Mnemosyne and Leto, each seeming to envy Hera the magic gem.

Pan pointed them out to Peter, while they waited for Hermes to start the program at the nod of Zeus. The presentation of the jewel that Peter still carried in the leather sack was the first event. Peter was to describe his adventures next. Then Zeus would reward him. Hermes was master of ceremonies.

Pan showed Peter Artemis, leaning on her bow, aloof.

"She'll not be sorry to get rid of that daughter of hers, I think, Peter," Pan said mischievously. He knew Peter's ideas in the matter, and the plan Peter had conceived, to which Pan had promised to lend his aid.

"She hasn't got rid of her yet."

Peter muttered, "and she won't—to me."

"Don't think too loud," Pan warned him. "They might hear you. Here comes my father."

HERMES bore a platen of crystal in which Peter was to place the jewel. He might not himself come too close to the glory that was Zeus lest, like Semele, he might be destroyed by contact with the power that Zeus emitted—too great for mortal flesh to sustain. Hermes would present the gem.

Used to wonders as they were, a murmur of admiration arose when they saw the wonder of the gem, vivid as the living blood of doves, a soft yet brilliant sphere of ruby flame. Zeus approved it with majestic nod, and bade Hermes offer it to Hera, who took it with a proud delight that made her handsome face really beautiful, tinged as it was from the reflection of the jewel.

The other goddesses gathered round, exclaiming, until Zeus lifted his hand. Hermes called for silence.

"Speak, mortal. Tell us of thy experience. Then crave of me thy boon, and it shall be granted, whatever it may be."

Peter saw Ephryne start forward, tug at her mother's arm, turn to Leto, and for one moment he feared she might forestall him. But even Artemis had been charmed by the gem's magnificence. She wanted to hear about it, and she shook Ephryne off.

"Don't be too modest," Pan had counseled Peter. "Lay it on thick, lad, except about Amphitrite. It's a wonder she's not here today. Poseidon must have returned. Play up the rest. Outdo Odysseus. String them all upon the thread of your tale."

Peter spoke up boldly. He did not boast, but he made the most of the perils he had encountered and overcome. He left Pan out almost altogether, as he knew the goat-god desired. The horseshoes went over well, and he made a great hit of his adventures with Python. There was a murmur of applause that meant a lot, for Olympus.

Peter knew what was the matter with the gods. They were bored. They knew it all, they had tried everything, and the zest was out of immortality.

Nor did they longer rule supreme over the mortals they could embroil, play with as children play with toy soldiers. Mortals knew other gods. Some of them even thought they were gods. But Peter had been a novelty.

Hephaestus limped forward. "It is true," he said. "All that he hath told of me. A likely lad, with a rare wit. Grant him his boon, O Zeus!"

"Speak, mortal. I, Zeus, have given my promise."

"O Mighty Zeus, Supreme Over All, thy humble servant begs this boon, though it has been high reward to serve thee. Yet am I weary and withal bewildered. Being but mortal, it is a strain for me merely to behold thy magnificence. I am but the clod at thy foot, O Zeus. Suffer me now to return to my own people, to my own land, where all the glory of thy realm may abide within my memory, and I shall not be overwhelmed, O Thunderer, for in thy presence I am as one who gazes into the eye of the sun and may not bear it."

Zeus stroked his beard and looked at Hera as much as to say: "You see?" He stroked the head of the eagle that sat on the arm of his throne.

"Thy boon is granted, mortal. Return."

There was a commotion where Ephryne stood, talking to Artemis and Leto.

Pan edged Peter was his elbow. "Let's scram," he said.

THEY moved off without undue speed until they were clear of the lesser courtiers. They went down from that terrace to the next, trying to avoid the appearance of too much haste.

"That was a fine speech you made to Zeus," Pan said.

"I thought it was pretty good myself. Do you often use the word 'scram,' Pan?"

"Why not? When one is in a coil, and sees a chance to scramble clear, it is a good word, surely—"

There came a call from behind. Ephryne's voice. "Peter—come back. Peter!"

"We don't hear them," said Pan. "Unless you want to go back."

"Me?" cried Peter. "Go back and marry that nitwit, that clacking windmill? Pan, she makes me sick. She's like a diet of too much honey. Go back, and get immortalized, and then have to listen to that tongue and see that face every morning—'for ever-and-ever-and-ever, Peter darling,'" he mimicked. "Not me, Pan. A mortal life would be much too long for that."

Pan chuckled. "I agree with you, Peter. One reason why I have never wed. But Artemis isn't going to take it nicely. Nor Leto. *Look out!*"

There came the twang of plucked sinew, the humming whine of a feathered shaft. Pan had tripped Peter, flung him to the ground, and he saw the arrow of the goddess bury itself halfway in the turf ahead of him.

Pan was up, yanking him to his feet again.

"Come on. Zeus won't let her shoot again right away, since he gave you permission to leave. But she'll be on your trail for jilting her daughter. It reflects on her. I've got to hide you where she can't turn you into a stag, hunt you with dogs."

They ran together, and for once Peter kept pace with Pan, expecting each moment to hear the whispering rush of another arrow, feel the shock of it as it sank into his flesh.

They dived into a thicket. Peter could hear the hubbub going on above them, the shrill voices of angry women predominating.

"I have it," Pan cried exultantly. "It's not far. We'll make it. But I'll have to carry you, Peter. No time for a rub, and you can't run fast enough. Artemis will be coming."

That was a far wilder ride than Pyloetius had ever given Peter. He clung pickaback, legs about Pan's hairy hips, arms about his neck, while Pan went bounding with great leaps through the bracken and the growth that was fortunately well above their heads.

"She's a mighty huntress, but we've got a good start. She'll never find you. Old Pan knows a trick or two. We're almost there."

They left the thicket, and Pan went leaping up a hill where oak trees grew in a stately grove. At the foot of one of them Pan set Peter down. Pan's barrel of a chest expanded proudly, with no sign of distress for that mad race. He took his syrinx—and Peter suddenly remembered his own whistle. It was gone. He must have lost it when they fled from Python.

"I hope she's not out," said Pan, setting the syrinx to his bearded lips. "She's a good sort."

Peter was quick on the uptake. "You mean Echo?" he asked.

Pan shook his head. "Not that lovesick little fool," he said. "She's crazy over Narcissus, who is crazy about himself. This is Phela, a far more understanding creature. This is her tree."

PAN BREATHED his call, strangely sweet, enticing. It was enough to conjure the demurest of dryads, Peter thought, watching a warm glow spread within the trunk of the oak, making it half transparent. Within he saw the shape of a woman, gradually becoming more plain. The rough bark of the oak seemed to dissolve, the bole parted, like a pliant curtain, and Phela stepped forth.

She wore no clothing, but her beauty offset any idea of nakedness. Her skin was the hue of oak leaves in the fall. She had a chaplet of wild vine about her head, and her long hair half clothed her in a mantle with the sheen of satin. Her eyes rested on Peter, turned to gaze at Pan with fond regard.

"Phela," said Pan, "I come to ask a favor. Let this lad stay within your oak. He has done no wrong, but he has displeased Artemis. She seeks to slay him."

"Artemis is cruel. She kills the wild things of the wood for wanton sport. Your will is my will, O Pan."

Phela turned to Peter. "For a friend of Pan I will do aught in my power," she said in her soft voice. "Step within."

Peter did so, and found himself in the heart of the tree, a cavity lined with silken fibers. The rind of the oak closed, and its glow died down. He was left in darkness. He could hear the soft sough of leaves overhead, distinguish the voices of Pan and Phela.

"She comes, Phela. Away with you. Stay near, but do not let her see you."

Pan was playing on his pipes as

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Artemis arrived, vengeful and suspicious.

"Where is the mortal who has dared to slight my daughter, Pan? Your protection shall avail him nothing."

"I had the idea he was under the protection of Zeus, Artemis. I thought I heard words to that effect."

"Zeus will not stand between me and my vengeance. You are sly, Pan, but beware of angering me."

"The lad is far beyond thy reach, Artemis. He has not passed this way. As for your ansger, I do not give a snap of my fingers for it. I may be sly, Artemis, but there are times when I have been discreet. The wild creatures that you hunt have eyes and ears and tongues. They are my little brethren and they have slight love for thee. Olympus will soon forget this mortal, who wisely feared to mate with Ephryne, but it might not forget some things that I might whisper in their willing ears."

Artemis' voice was harsh with fury.

"You are a gossiping old goat. I've half a mind—"

Pan gave out a jeering bleat.

"You footless fool!" Artemis answered. "Gossips are like frogs that drink and talk."

"Going so soon, Artemis? Well, good hunting."

Pan started to play again. Peter guessed the irate Artemis had gone. The piping kept on for a while, and Peter grew drowsy. The soft lining of the dryad oak took him into its embrace.

When he awakened a breeze blew on his face. The oak had parted. He stepped out and saw Pan with his arm about Phela. He saw stars shining through the trees.

"I shall return, Phela. I swear it by the sandals of my father, Hermes. Stay in thy tree, fair nymph."

Pan tapped Peter on the shoulder.

"One last ambrosial rub, Peter. Then you'll be on your way. Didst hear me get rid of Artemis? Achilles had a vulnerable heel. Her weak spot is her reputation. She's a good deal of a snob, is Artemis."

"I FEAR I have nothing to give you but my thanks, O Pan!"

Pan laughed. He and Peter stood once more before the high hedge of laurel, sacred to Daphne.

"Pan desires no reward, lad. But you might tell your people that Great Pan is *not* dead! I grieve to part with thee. Thou art well quit of that Ephryne. She will not improve with age. And once they begin to get jealous—look at Zeus. If you ever wish to return, come to the shrine of Hermes, sound the air of Syrinx, and I shall *let you through the laurel* once again."

"My thanks to thee, Great Pan! But never while Ephryne is unattached."

Suddenly he thought of the flask Hephaestus had given him. He drew it from his pocket.

"This is liquor, as we make it in my country, Pan. I showed Hephaestus how to brew it. It is but a paltry gift."

"I was just wishing, lad, we had a lap of nectar."

Pan unscrewed the plug, smelled, tasted, poured a libation on the earth, tilted the flask.

Peter watched him swallow, marveling.

"Wow!"

Pan spluttered breath of brandy on the air. Once more he applied himself to the neck of the flask.

"Now, by all the gods, Peter, that is a drink! *Whooroo!"*

The laurel was already shivering. Pan stood with his goat legs well apart, yellow eyes shining. He waved Peter a farewell.

The laurel closed behind Peter. In front of him was the ruined shrine.

"WHOOPEE!" Pan had finished the flask of brandy. Peter heard the tattoo of his hoofs as he tap-danced on the turf, went leaping off. *"Whooroo!"* Then came the lilt of the Panpipes, missing some notes, but fluting merrily.

PETER FELT in his pocket. The little ivory hippos was still there. The moon was low and the stars were paling, but there was light enough to set the offering back where he had found it, in the crevice.

As he did so, the lizard shot out, leaped to the fallen Hermes.

This seemed the right thing to do, Peter reasoned. It was his link with the past he had surrendered. Now he was back in his own dimension. He had to reorient himself.

Burton must have given him up for lost, or dead, long ago.

He tried to figure out how long he had been away. It was not easy. Earth days and Olympian days might rate very different calendars. But there had been *so* many nights —*so* many days.

Instinctively he started for the camp site. It was less than a mile away. Of course, Burton might have left some sort of message for him to find.

There came a low rumble of thunder, over Olympus way. A jagged streak of lightning.

The harsh bray of a jackass.

Ajax! *By all that was holy, Ajax!* Defying the lightning!

The tent was still there! A light showed through the canvas—a shadow that emerged.

"Peter! Where in Time have you been? You had me worried. I've been hunting for you ever since sup-

per. I had made up my mind to find someone and organize a search for you. I was afraid you'd fallen into some ruin. What happened? Did you get lost?"

Peter was confused. Where in Time *had* he been? According to Burton, he had been missing less than twenty-four hours. He felt his chin. He needed a shave all right, but not more than usual of a morning. He could not remember having fallen asleep at the shrine. Where in Time—

"Not hurt, or sick, are you? You must be starved. I'll rustle you some grub."

"No, thanks, I'm not hungry. You were right. I—just got lost."

"Well, you're back now."

"Yeah, I'm back."

He had given Hermes back the ivory hippos. Pan had the flask of Hephaestus. Pyloetius had his lighter. Or had he dreamed that? No, the lighter was gone—

"I'm a bit tired, old chap," he said to Burton. "Think I'll turn in. But first, give me a cigarette, will you? I'm all out of them."

A Few Notes on the Reliability of Newspaper Clippings Without Additional Remarks About Charles Fort and Others.

AMONG the questions that puzzle the average newspaper reader occasionally there is the one of how the editors manage to always get enough material to fill the pages to capacity. The answer is, of course, that they usually get more news than the space not occupied by advertisements can handle, so that they only use enough to fill said space and forget about the rest. But when in peaceful times there is not enough news, things do get tough. The surplus that can still be used lasts sometimes only for a day or two and then small-town and provincial newspapers with little money for special features and articles have to resort to obscure items, chosen not for value but for length—the length required to fill a certain bit of space.

Sometimes these items are a bit old, as proved by the Lincoln *Herald* of July 1, 1831, where a bit of "news" read:

> An Italian gentleman, named Barthema, said to be entitled to implicit credit, who has just returned from Africa, states that he saw two unicorns at Mecca which had been sent as a present from the King of Ethiopia to the Sultan.

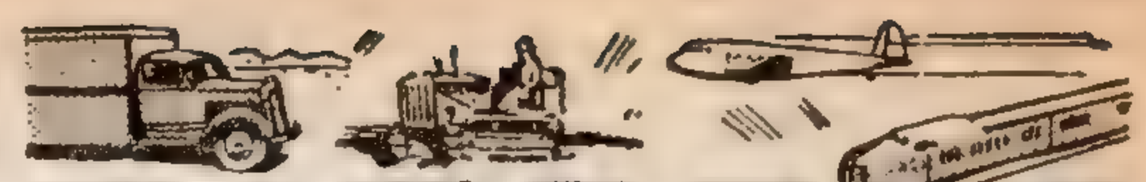
The report would have been essentially correct and new exactly three centuries before it was printed. The "Italian gentleman" mentioned was the traveler E. Wartmann, who in about 1520 returned from what is now called Turkey with exactly that tale.

Sometimes they are somewhat obscure, as proven by the story of the "coughing plant," which should be famous. That story originated in the winter of 1898-99 when a few scientists with a sense of humor gathered in the house of one of them who happened to have a bad cough. Talking about the physiological necessity of coughing—removal of irritations from the throat—one of them marveled why no plant had ever invented coughing. Dust in the pores of leaves is harmful to plants, but a little convulsive movement and some air escaping under slight pressure would help. The party ended with the writing of a short article

about the discovery of such a plant, which was published as an April fool's joke in the April 1st issue of the *Münchner Neueste Nachrichten* in 1899. Two weeks later the item was reprinted with conspicuous display by a large newspaper in Berlin. Again two weeks later it appeared in French in the *Journal de la Santé*. Sometime after that the English version was published in the Sydney *Mail*. And from there it was reprinted again and again in newspapers all over India, England and America. And in 1924 one of the editors of a large newspaper in Hamburg retranslated it from the English for use as a filler.

And sometimes these items are neither old nor of obscure origin—but their reliability can still be doubted very much.

In 1935—to be exact, on Palm Sunday of that year—the American Rocket Society tested a number of rocket motors on the estate of its president, G. Edward Pendray, in Crestwood, Westchester County. I was present when these tests were made, simple ground tests on a proving stand just finished by the engineers of the society. One New York newspaper—I refrain from mentioning the name but I have the clipping at home—had sent a reporter, a college graduate with much interest for



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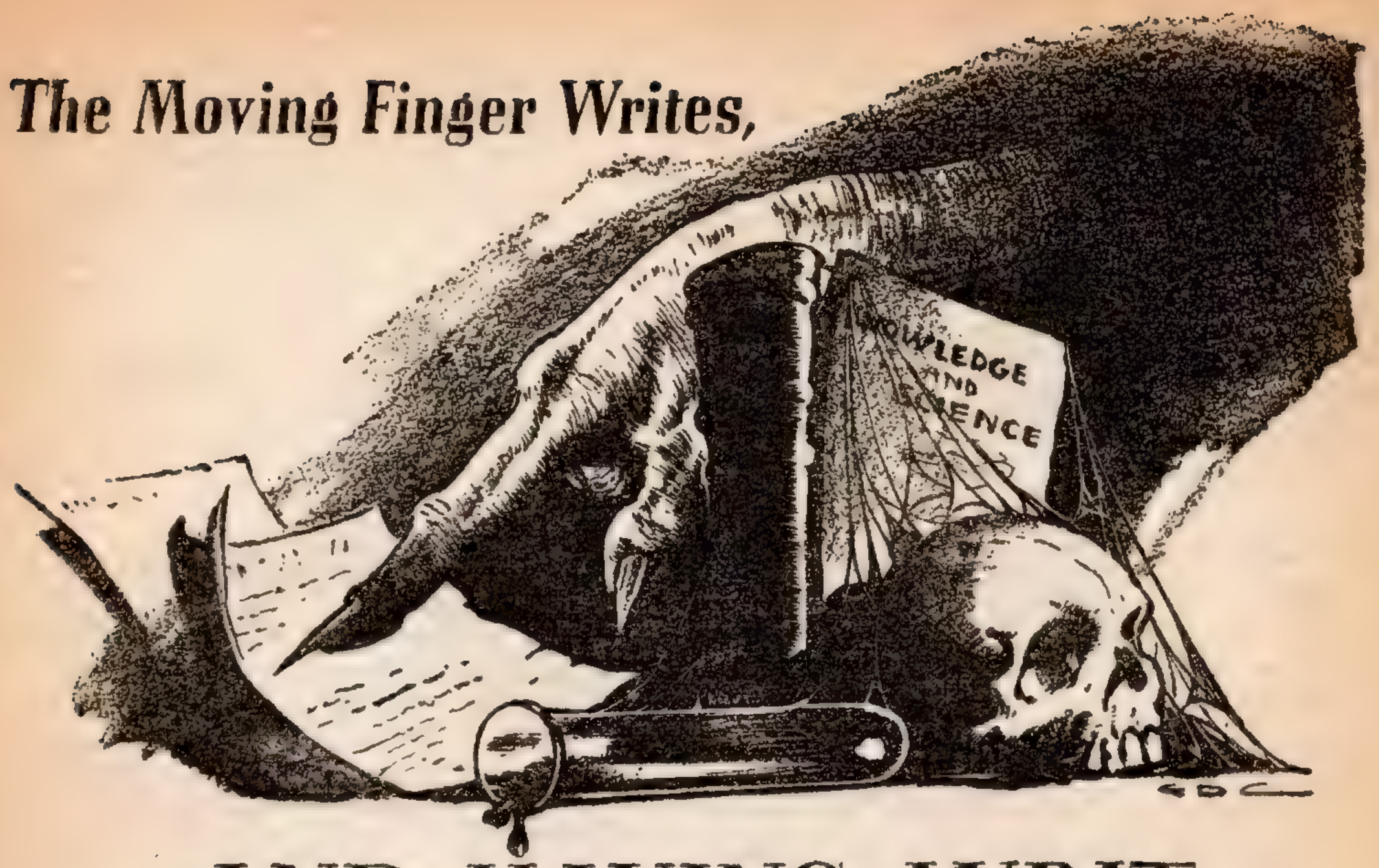
and much understanding of engineering problems. He interviewed Pendray and me about our views on rocket research and got practically the same story from both of us. We talked about the necessity of continuation of ground tests at first, then construction of small unmanned, instrument-carrying rockets for meteorological research, gradual increase of the size of these rockets, et cetera, et cetera. Everything was put with scrupulous accuracy and there seemed to be no doubt that the problem was understood correctly. But when the fairly short write-up appeared two or three days later there was no word about the reasons for ground tests to be found in it. There was no word about altitudes, air resistance or automatic parachutes. But the headline made up for all that in saying: "Rocket Trains Near Perfection."

But such inaccuracy of reporting is not the major source of weird and wonderful material. There is, in addition to the European sources of April Fool gags—ranging from the famous French Sextuplets, complete with photographs of the six babies, all strangely identical to the solemn and scientific items like the coughing plant—the typically American brand of nature faking. It has been developed to a high art, reported from coast to coast by press-wire services, with recognized experts in various States. In their native land, they do no harm and cause no confusion, but translated and retranslated by unwary European or Oriental papers, they, like the German stories appearing the first of April, become confused with fact.

Newspaper stories seem to represent, in fact, that old theory of sound waves, that, once started, circle the Earth forever, merely becoming more and more confused with echoes and later additions.

WILLY LEY.



---AND HAVING WRIT---

The longest was "Slaves of Sleep." The new type threw you off.

Dear Mr. Campbell:

Concerning the December issue, which I just received: Personally, I don't see how it could be improved, a cover by Cartier that is a little gem. I have always liked Cartier's drawings for Unknown for they seem to convey the atmosphere very well; not too grim or stern, but just right. A story that is extra long by my favorite author, L. Sprague de Camp. This story is the longest yet according to my calculations, ninety-six and a half pages long, which is, I figure; about sixty thousand words. This is just right for me because the longer the novel the better I like it.

Now as for the November issue: The long novel wasn't as good as the first Prester John story. The shorts were very good except for "The Question Is Answered." "Day Off" was good, as generally is the case for H. L. Gold's stories. "The Bronze Door" was good and "The Monocle" was good. Incidentally, Wesso's drawings for the last mentioned were the best by him that I have seen in a long time. I am sorry that "—And Having Writ—" was cut out, but it is good news that the type is to be improved. I wish you would get an Analytical Laboratory like *Astounding*, as I am quite interested in what the other readers think of the stories. It would just take a page, and I'm sure that most readers wouldn't even notice the loss of this. Until another issue comes along that is as good as the December, I remain—Norman Knudson, 2516 Van Buren Ave., Ogden, Utah.

Maybe the "visitors" will collect a few depth bombs by mistake now!

Dear Mr. Campbell:

I have hesitated writing this long for fear that Unknown wouldn't be able to keep up its extremely high standard, but it has done just that. For it to give me more entertainment would be impossible.

The December issue is a very typical example, made especially typical by the presence of that greatest of all authors—as far as I and many others are concerned—L. Sprague de Camp. "Lest Darkness Fall" was, as you probably suspect already, the tops in the issue. Next came "Vanderdecken," then "Johnny on the Spot," and last "Five Fathoms of Pearls." The time-travel article wasn't very interesting. The book review was good. Let's have more of them. Am very glad about Cartier being in the issue so much. How about having Cartier in every issue?

Your next best authors are L. Ron Hubbard and H. L. Gold. Be sure and hang onto them. Oh, yes, and also Eric Frank Russell. The latter's "Sinister Barrier" gave Unknown the best beginning a mag ever had. His article, "Over the Border," was also super. When does the next boat leave for Crozet and Kerguelen, the base islands?

Now I think two Prester John yarns with practically the same plots are enough. If you have to have another, have one of those arrows pierce Wan Tengri's hide in it.

Never have another like "Returned from Hell" which was Unknown's only slip so far.

"None But Lucifer," "The Enchanted Week End," "The Ultimate Adventure," "A God in a Garden," "Divide and Rule," "Slaves of Sleep," and "The Ghoul" constitute the true masterpieces of Unknown besides the others already designated in a like manner.—Franklyn Brady, 140 So. Maple Dr., Beverly Hills, Cal.

Incidentally, "Pipes of Pan" will appear in Unknown shortly—

Dear Mr. Campbell:

De Camp's "Darkness" was what I'd consider one lovely story. Cockeyed history backed up by a solid knowledge of genuine history exactly suits me. And the closing comments on stopping Mohammed's followers was the perfect finish. In the old and orthodox history, Mohammed served a useful purpose; he preserved—or his followers did—the knowledge of the Greeks. In De Camp's history, he could only mess things up.

As for "Time Travel Happens," I've been trying to figure out the catch for several years, and still can't see what's wrong. I don't believe it, but I can't dispute the evidence piled up, nor the honesty of the writers of the book. If the thing worked, though, it's so darned complicated by the very simplicity of its workings, that it just doesn't fit. The next time someone slips back, though, I hope they've read "Darkness." Maybe they could find out whether history could be changed—or could they get back then?

But one of the letters in "—And Having Writ—" is what caught my attention most. Eric Williams wants to know why the animals are here, if "None But Lucifer" is a true explanation of the way of things, and also why people get a religious uplift. Well, along with Mr. Williams, I'll have to assume a God to match Lucifer, but otherwise the explanation seems clear enough. Remembering that animals usually live for shorter times and have less conscious troubles than men, it seems to me they might be lesser offenders, with brains mercifully tuned to only the more physical worries.

As for the uplift, maybe the fact that they have made an effort to repent of their sins—even unknown ones—and get closer to their God, brings them nearer their original state, for the time being. More probably, judging by the Crusades, Inquisition, and the like, God doesn't mind His glory being used for torment; the sinners have sinned against Him, and anything that will make them miserable is fair. If we assume there is a God, as most do, plenty of misery accrues from man's interpretation of His glory.

And—I'm sending a short called "Pipes of Pan" in Monday. I hope it's more along the lines you want than the stuff I've been trying lately.—R. Alvarez del Rey, 933 23rd St., N. W., Washington, D. C.

Blackball for "Black Goat."

Dear Mr. Campbell:

This is a belated effort on my part to let you know of my appreciation of the fine stories and features that have appeared in Unknown since its inception some eleven months ago. Of course, there have been some inferior stories, in my opinion, that is. Such as the poorly-plotted, indifferently-written "Soldiers of the Black Goat" in the current issue. Unfortunately, this mediocre tale consumed almost half of the issue's wordage. And the other stories were all so very, very entertaining.

I believe the issue's outstanding story was A. E. van Vogt's "The Sea Thing," a truly hair-raising tale. This comparatively new writer in the field of fantasy seems to always come through with polished, plausible, carefully-written stories.

Close behind Van Vogt's effort came "Doubled in Brass," a great excerpt from the amusing adventures of the little elf, Coppersmith. More of him.

Dunn's serial, "On the Knees of the Gods," got off to a good start. I think it'll prove worthy of the distinction of being Unknown's first continued story.

"Swamp Train" depended on the excel-

lence of the writing for its standing, for the plot development was obvious from the first appearance of the ghostly train.

January's illustrators turned in a nice job, with Isip and Kramer doing themselves proud. H. W. Scott's cover was adequate, not the best nor the worst Unknown has presented in the past.

Unknown is invading a portion of the magazine field that has not as yet been ably represented and, judging from the issues heretofore, I believe your mag is going to do the job up brown.

Please accept my best wishes for continued success.—Dan E. Anderson, East New Market, Md.

There's an article coming in *Astounding* that suggests reasons for astrology!

Dear Mr. Campbell:

I am writing this missive simply because I have been impressed. Impressed, mind you, by one single little story that might easily have slipped by me in my reading. Lately, I haven't had time to read all of Unknown, even though I still buy it as soon as it hits the newsstand. I glanced quickly through the January issue and started to file it away in my library when a story caught my eye. It was "Swamp Train." There was SOMETHING about that story that got inside me and stayed there. It brought back memories of a not so distant childhood, some scant eight years or so ago, of when I lived in a small country town and often found such scenery and such atmosphere as was described so well in Walton's yarn. There was feeling in that story. I don't know how to put over the idea, but it was the sort of thing that makes you draw a bit nearer the fire or jerk suddenly around to look at the darkness just outside your window or perhaps stiffen at the sound of dry leaves clacking on the panes. Walton's yarn had IT. It speaks with the melancholy of old memories of country nights, of deserted places and cold moonlight. It is so close to reality as to be REAL in my mind. I have experienced exactly those same feelings. This, then, is probably the reason why Unknown is so popular. It takes an everyday bit of scenery, an incident and shows its other side. It makes you wonder what it is all about, this life of ours, and if we are really as cocksure about our science as we think we are. It is a splendid antidote for "scientific poisoning" that one might get from some of the super-science *Astounding* sto-

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ries. The two mags balance each other. If you pick up Unknown first and get that ice-cubish feeling about your spine the best remedy is a quick dash of atoms and doctors with black spade beards and disintegrators at ye olde ship *Astounding*. And when you get tired of feeding molecules to the Martian fuddy-duddies and your brain is so full of mechanics and theories that it squeaks, it is a simple task to open up Unknown and get air-conditioned via the old Salem witchery way.

Do me a favor and pat Willy Ley on the back for his article "It Happens Twice At Least." His remarks on this "hooey" astrology are received exuberantly by such as I. I think what most of these astrological old maids and gentlemen with gout need is a copy of *Astounding* and Unknown on their bedroom table instead of Astrological nincompoopery. Or maybe I'm wrong. Maybe there is something to astrology. Tell you what—prove that there is no sense to it in *Astounding* and then turn around and give us a creepy yarn about the stars in Unknown. To make matters worse I might even write one myself for rejection.

Anyway, the January issue, which I was forced to complete out of curiosity keeps the old Unknown caldron muttering and boiling merrily. Not a bad story in the issue. And the cover was good.

How about another one by Cartier? A cover, I mean. His cover on the Dec. ish was splendid.

Stamp out a bronze plaque for A. E. van Vogt. He has my *vogt* (ugh) of thanks for his "The Sea Thing." An intriguing story, indeed.

Next comes "Doubled In Brass," which sounds vaguely like the title for an article by Tommy Dorsey and his band, but turned out to be a yarn worth remembering.

Plaudits for Marian O'Hearn and her "Soldiers of the Black Goat," which, however, will never make me forget the hours I spent laughing over "Slaves Of Sleep" and the prickly nights I went through finishing up "Sinister Barrier."

So, here's to a complete year of Unknown almost over. Let there be no "Sinister Barrier" between you and your authors as long as they write such swell yarns. And as long as they do I shall not be a "Slave Of Sleep," but will stay up nights reading until "None But Lucifer" makes "Darkness Fall," lest fur me.

Just another fan Charlie McCarthy—"ON THE KNEES OF THE GODS."—Ray D. Bradbury, Editor of *Futuria Fantasia*, Los Angeles, Calif.

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